

THE USE AND MEANING OF THE PHRASE 'THE SON OF MAN' IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS: PART I¹.

THE subject suggested by the above title has been earnestly discussed in recent years, especially on the continent; and some account of the present state of the question, with a tentative suggestion for its solution, may be of interest to English readers. It is clear that the Evangelists represent Jesus as applying the title 'Son of Man' to Himself; but their report is not implicitly trusted by critics of the Gospels, and the question may fairly be raised how far our doubts are to be carried. Some eminent scholars have thought themselves justified in denying, on theological grounds, that Jesus ever applied the term to Himself at all; and others maintain the same thesis because the title does not, and for linguistic reasons cannot, exist in Aramaic, the language which was habitually spoken by Jesus². This problem is therefore preliminary to an inquiry into the sense which we are to attach to the phrase as used in the Gospels. It may be

¹ Since this article was written some time ago Dr. Driver, whose valuable aid I acknowledge farther on, has called my attention to two articles by Prof. Schmiedel in the *Protestantische Monatshefte*, 1898, pp. 252 sqq. and 291 sqq., and a reply by Lietzmann in the *Theologische Arbeiten aus dem rheinischen wissenschaftlichen Prediger-Verein*, Neue Folge, Zweites Heft, 1898. Though I have tried to make one or two points a little clearer, these essays have not affected my conclusions.

In regard to the earlier part of the discussion I must disclaim all pretence of being an authority in Aramaic. I have only endeavoured to collect fairly the evidence presented by experts, and to exercise my own judgement upon it as thus presented.

It may be as well to observe that, though the question of the Messianic consciousness and claims of Jesus is connected with the present subject, it is by no means dependent on the particular solution which is reached, and the two problems should be kept distinct.

² Hans Lietzmann, *Der Menschensohn*, 1896, p. 85; J. Wellhausen, *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten*, Sechstes Heft, 1899, article *Des Menschen Sohn*, pp. 187-215.

impossible to arrive yet at any confident conclusion; but the way towards a final result has been marked out by recent investigations.

The first point to be noted is that Jesus almost certainly spoke the ordinary Aramaic of the Semitic population of Galilee, and that the Synoptic Gospels have, to a considerable extent, an Aramaic basis, whether that basis be regarded as a written source (a primitive Gospel) or as oral teaching which found its first literary expression in Greek ¹.

In endeavouring to ascertain the precise expression which Jesus must have used, and the meaning to be attached to it, we may begin by noticing Hebrew usage; for independently of the fact that Hebrew is akin to Aramaic, the language of a religious people is naturally coloured by that of their scriptures. In biblical Hebrew בְּנֵי אָדָם has almost always a collective meaning, so that to express a plurality of individuals the phrase בְּנֵי אָדָם or בְּנֵי אֱנוֹשׁ was employed instead of a plural termination. See for instance Gen. xi 5, where the Septuagint render the latter expression by *οἱ υἱοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων*. In Ps. xlix [xlvi] 3 בְּנֵי אָדָם is followed by שְׂכָנֵי אָדָם , the Septuagint translating *οἱ τε γηγενεῖς καὶ οἱ υἱοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων*, and our English versions 'both low and high,' thus giving an inferior sense to בְּנֵי אָדָם . The singular בֶּן אָדָם , if we except its occurrence in words addressed to Ezekiel frequently², and once to Daniel³, is very rare, and occurs only in poetic speech, where it is occasioned by the parallelism. Thus in Num. xxiii 19, in Balaam's reply to Balak, which is expressed in poetic form, we read 'God is not a man (אֱנוֹשׁ), that he should lie, or a son of man (בֶּן אָדָם) that he should repent.' In Job xvi 21 [22] it corresponds with אֱנוֹשׁ , an individual man, and in xxv 6 is parallel with אֱנוֹשׁ , as it is also in Ps. viii 5, Isa. li 12, lvi 2 (where it is rendered by the Septuagint simply *ἄνθρωπος*). In Job xxxv 8 it is parallel with אֱנוֹשׁ , as it is also in Ps. lxxx [lxxix] 18

¹ See the evidence presented at length by Gustaf Dalman, *Die Worte Jesu*, Band I, 1898, Einleitung, who is adverse to the hypothesis of a Hebrew or Aramaic Urevangelium; and Wellhausen, l. c., pp. 188 sqq., who is in favour of an Aramaic document or documents. They agree that Jesus certainly spoke Aramaic, and that therefore words of doubtful import in his teaching should be translated back into Aramaic.

² I have counted eighty-eight times, and we should observe that it is never spoken by Ezekiel as a designation of himself.

³ viii 17.

(‘The man of thy right hand, the son of man whom thou madest strong for thyself’), Jer. xlix 18 [xxix 19], xlix 33 [xxx 11], l [xxvii] 40, li [xxviii] 43.

If for the moment we leave Ezekiel out of account, it would appear that the phrase is simply a poetical expression for ‘man.’ Schenkel denies this, and maintains that it denotes one ‘who has a human, temporal, earthly, transitory origin, who passes away again as he has come, whose days on earth are numbered,’ man ‘especially in his unconditional dependence upon God the Eternal, Almighty, Lordly, the Creator of heaven and earth,’ and so it expresses humility and self-depreciation¹. But these ideas, which are gathered from the context of several passages (including those in which the plural is used), do not separate it from the simple meaning of ‘man,’ for which, in the singular, it is almost always used as an equivalent, to suit the form of Hebrew poetry. The passages in Jeremiah present a perfectly neutral meaning (simply ‘no one shall dwell there’); and Ps. lxxx [lxxix] 18 shows that the phrase may be used in an exalted sense. I think, therefore, that we are not justified in saying that it is more than a periphrasis for ‘man,’ even when it appears from the context that man’s frail and transient nature is uppermost in the writer’s thought.

I cannot but think that the same sense is quite adequate to explain its use in Ezekiel. In every instance of its occurrence it is addressed to Ezekiel, and so describes him as the human instrument through whom the Divine word is to be conveyed to others. It is indeed, in Hebrew, the natural way of indicating one who is regarded simply as a member of the human race.

Biblical Aramaic follows a similar usage. אָנָשׁ is a collective word, and so we find as identical in meaning the expressions מִן־אֲנָשִׁים טָרִיד² and מִן־בְּנֵי אֲנָשִׁים טָרִיד³ ‘thrust out from among men.’ Accordingly אִישׁ אֶשׁ in Dan. vii 13, where alone the expression is found in biblical Aramaic, denotes simply ‘one like a man,’ one in the human form, in contrast with the beast-forms of the earlier part of the vision; and with this may be compared the phrase אִישׁ אֶשׁ, said of the beast that stood on his feet like a man⁴, and אִישׁ אֶשׁ, ‘like the eyes of a man’⁵. Though our idiom

¹ *Bibel-Lex.*² Dan. iv 30.³ *Ibid.* v 21.⁴ *Ibid.* vii 4.⁵ *Ibid.* vii 8.

represents these phrases by the singular, there is nothing in them to preclude the collective meaning. An individual man is בְּרִי ¹.

Now Lietzmann², in essential agreement with Eerdmans³, and supported by Wellhausen, maintains that the expression in Aramaic which has been translated $\delta \nu\iota\delta\varsigma \tau\omicron\upsilon\delta \acute{\alpha}\nu\theta\rho\omega\pi\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ must have been *barnasha* (בַּר נִשָּׂא). As this meant simply $\delta \acute{\alpha}\nu\theta\rho\omega\pi\omicron\varsigma$, and was therefore in no way distinctive, it could not have been used as a personal designation; and accordingly the distinction which appears in Greek between $\delta \acute{\alpha}\nu\theta\rho\omega\pi\omicron\varsigma$ and $\delta \nu\iota\delta\varsigma \tau\omicron\upsilon\delta \acute{\alpha}\nu\theta\rho\omega\pi\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$, being impossible in Aramaic, cannot be authentic, and must have been introduced by later interpreters and editors of the evangelical tradition⁴. In order to determine the question thus raised appeal is made to surviving monuments of the early Aramaic dialects; and unfortunately eminent Aramaic scholars do not all arrive at the same conclusion. The following are the leading facts.

Aramaic inscriptions connected with Palestine contain not a single instance of בְּרִי אֱנִישׁ , although the latter word without בְּרִי is found. Of the Nabataean inscriptions there are about thirty, of eight to fourteen lines each, dating from 9 B.C. to 75 A.D.⁵, and 'the Aramaic has many features of resemblance to that of Daniel⁶.' This is important evidence on account of the date; but its value is of course impaired by its scantiness. The phrase is also absent from the Targum of Onkelos, which has the plural בְּרֵי אֱנִישֵׁי a few times, but always renders 'man' by אֱנִישׁ , not בְּרִי אֱנִישׁ . The Targum of Jonathan on the Prophets uses the plural frequently, but avoids the singular except in five or six places, where it represents the Hebrew בְּרִי אָדָם ⁷, and once where it answers to the Hebrew בְּרֵי אָדָם ⁸. In adopting בְּרִי אָדָם for בְּרִי אָדָם throughout Ezekiel the Targumist conveys the meaning 'son of Adam⁹.' Dalman infers from these facts, and from the late appearance of בְּרִי אֱנִישׁ as an ordinary expression in the surviving literature, that in the Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of

¹ I take the foregoing partly from Dalman, *op. cit.* pp. 191 sq.

² *Op. cit.* pp. 30, 81 sq.

³ *Theol. Tijdschr.* 1894, pp. 153-176. This I have not read.

⁴ See Wellhausen, *op. cit.* p. 196.

⁵ Professor Driver, in a letter to me; and see some details in his *Introduction to the Literature of the O. T.* p. 472 (ed. 7 p. 504).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Isa. li 12 (in some texts: בְּרִי אָדָם); lvi 2; Jer. xlix 18, 33; I 40; li 43.

⁸ Mic. v 6.

⁹ See Dalman, pp. 193 sq.; Lietzmann, pp. 31 sq.

the older time the word ܩܪܝܢܐ was used for 'man,' but that ܩܪܝܢܐ was not current, and was adopted only in imitation of the Hebrew text of the Bible¹.

Wellhausen, who takes a different view, dismisses the evidence of the Targums on the ground that they adhere closely to the Hebrew, and contends that the appearance of the phrase in Daniel sufficiently proves that it was current in Judaea; and he therefore maintains that it is found in all Aramaic dialects, and signifies neither more nor less than $\delta \lambda\theta\rho\omega\rho\omicron\varsigma$ in Greek². The suggested explanation of the absence of the phrase from the Targums is hardly adequate; for, as Professor Driver points out, the Peshitta is a close translation, and yet it uses *barnasha*, not only in the New Testament, but in the Old, where it is immediately dependent on the Hebrew text³. 'It might therefore be reasonably argued that if the expression were current in the idiom of Onkelos and Jonathan, it would have occurred in their Targums more frequently than it does⁴.' Dalman anticipates the arguments from the use of the expression in Daniel by pointing out, I think quite correctly, that the passage is conceived in elevated and poetical language; and Professor Driver calls attention to the fact that in Dan. vii 4 and 8 *barnash* might have been used instead of the simple ܩܪܝܢܐ ⁵, and that it is actually used in the Peshitta in vii 8 as well as in the similar passages in Ezek. i 8, 10, 26; x 8, 14⁶, and in the later Syriac versions of Apoc. iv 7⁷. Professor Driver also considers Wellhausen's generalisation to be questionable, because 'the Aramaic dialects do differ in small points, both of grammatical form, and also of vocabulary . . . so they might have differed in this.'

Appeal is, however, made to documents which represent the Galilean dialect. The Palestinian Lectionary of the Gospels (often cited as the Jerusalem Syriac) is assigned to the fifth⁸

¹ Dalman, p. 194.

² Wellhausen, pp. 195 sq.

³ Exod. xiii 13, 15; Lev. xviii 5; Isa. xlv 13 *ad fin.*; Jer. ii 6, x 14; in all which passages the Hebrew is simply ܩܪܝܢܐ : in the New Testament, Matt. iv 4; xii 12, 43; xv 11 *bis*, 18; xix 6, &c., where the Greek is $\delta\lambda\theta\rho\omega\rho\omicron\varsigma$, with or without the article. Syr^{scr} has sometimes ܩܪܝܢܐ , sometimes ܩܪܝܢܐ in these passages in Matt.: see further below, p. 356 notes 2, 3, 4.

⁴ Professor Driver, in his letter.

⁵ Twice in verse 4.

⁶ All ܩܪܝܢܐ in the Hebrew. ⁷ Passages all referring to the 'living creatures.'

⁸ [Mr. Burkitt, however, *J. T. S.* ii 174 ff., has given reasons for regarding the

or sixth century, and there ברנשא is the regular translation of $\delta \alpha \nu \theta \rho \omega \pi \omicron \varsigma$, while the simple אַנש, which is also found, is equivalent to a mere indefinite pronoun, and is sometimes used to translate $\tau \iota \varsigma$. The same usage is found in some fragments published by Land, and the completeness with which the phrase had become the current expression for 'man' is strikingly shown by the 'monstrous form' which was adopted to represent 'the son of man,' ברה דברנשא, i.e. 'the son of the son of man,' for which sometimes ברה דגברא is substituted. According to Lietzmann there can be no doubt that these phrases were coined in order to meet the exigencies of a translation¹. The Jerusalem Talmud, probably of the fourth century, which had its origin in the rabbinical school at Tiberias, gives similar testimony, בר נש being used as the equivalent of 'man².' There are many examples of the same usage in the Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan on the Pentateuch (of about the seventh century), besides the few instances mentioned by Dalman, both in a general sense (*barnash*), and in an individual sense 'that man' (*barnasha*). It is also found in the Palestinian Targum on the Hagiographa (sixth-seventh century). Dalman infers from a comparison of these late authorities with the earlier evidence that the usage in question was an innovation, which, with many other influences affecting the vocabulary, came into Palestine from the north-east³. On the other hand, Lietzmann and Wellhausen think that these Palestinian documents may be accepted as evidence of the language which was spoken some three hundred years before they were written. This certainly appears to me to be very precarious evidence on which to rely so confidently, for a language may undergo considerable changes in the course of a few centuries, and it is no very great change for a poetic expression to become current in popular speech, especially when it is suited, as in the present instance, to the genius of the people. The most that we can legitimately affirm is, with Professor Driver, that perhaps these authorities 'at least create a presumption, greater than Dalman is willing to allow.'

whole Christian Palestinian Syriac literature as not earlier than 550 A. D., and holds that in any case its Biblical translations show such timid dependence on the Greek that the terms adopted in them cannot be used as evidence for the original form of any Semitic expression.]

¹ p. 33.

² See the evidence in Lietzmann, pp. 34-39q.

³ p. 195.

Finally, Dalman appeals to the language of the Gospels themselves. 'Man' and 'men' are frequently spoken of: how is it that the former is never represented by *υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου*, and the latter by *οἱ υἱοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων* only in Mark iii 28?¹ This fact certainly seems to render it probable that, if an Aramaic source was used, there must have been some linguistic distinction between 'man' and 'son of man' in the language spoken by Jesus.

A question still remains. Even if *barnasha* was regularly used in the sense of 'man' in the Galilean speech in the time of Christ, was it impossible to make in Aramaic the distinction which appears in the Greek Gospels between *ἄνθρωπος* and *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου*? In answer to this, appeal is made to the Syriac versions. Pesh., Cur., and Sin. succeed in presenting the distinction. For 'man' or 'a man' in the abstract they use *ܐܢܫܐ*² or *ܐܢܫܐ*³; but for 'the son of man' they employ *b'reh d'nasha*⁴, literally 'his son, that of man.' This is, as Professor Driver points out, a common pleonasm in Aramaic, at least in other expressions. Thus we have in Dan. ii 20 *ܐܢܫܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ*, 'his name, that of God'; in Matt. i 1 *ܥܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܕܐܘܕܐ*, 'the son of David'; and in Matt. iv 6 *ܥܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܥܡܐ*, xxvi 63 *ܥܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܥܡܐ*, 'Son of God.' Wellhausen has apparently overlooked these facts, and at all events he has made a slip when he says that the '*b'reh d barnasha* of the Peshitta is a mere theological barbarism, a despairing attempt to render the Greek *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου* as exactly as possible in Syriac⁵.' The 'barbarism' is in the Palestinian Lectionary, but not in Pesh., Cur., or Sin. In consequence of the same oversight he alleges that the union of a singular suffix with *nasha*, so as to make *b'reh d nasha*, is, in spite of Dalman, 'impossible⁶.' As it is actually a standing expression in the Syriac Versions it is not 'impossible'; and, as Professor Driver remarks, it is difficult to see any theoretical objection to it as a grammatical form, since *ܐܢܫܐ* is constantly in the Targums construed with a singular verb or with singular suffixes referring to it, and there are even parallel phrases which prove that this was not the mere device

¹ Dalman, p. 195. ² See, for instance, Cur., Matt. iv 4; xv 11, 18; xix 6.

³ For instance, Cur., Matt. xii 12, 43; xv 11; Jo. i 6.

⁴ *ܐܢܫܐ ܕܥܡܐ* generally; but sometimes *ܐܢܫܐ ܕܥܡܐ*, properly 'filius viri.' Of the latter I have noted Marc. viii 38^{sin}, Jo. xiii 31^{sin} (both wanting in Cur.), Luc. vii 34^{sin} *cur*, ix 26^{cur} (wanting in Sin.), xxii 48^{cur}. [Also Matt. xii 40 in Aphaetes.] ⁵ p. 194, note 3. ⁶ p. vi.

of a perplexed translator:—Job xiv 19^{pesh.} 'his hope, that of man' (ܘܗܘܐ ܘܡܢ); Isa. xiii 7^{targ.} 'his heart, that of man' (so Lagarde: other texts read ܘܡܢ). These examples seem to prove that the phrase under examination need not be regarded as a mere translation from the Greek back into Aramaic, and also that ܡܫܝܚܐ may retain its abstract sense, and need not be translated 'the man,' as though the expression meant the son of some particular individual.

Through the kindness of the Rev. Philemon Moore I am able to communicate the opinion of Professor Nöldeke, the highest living authority in the Aramaic languages¹. 1. The expression *barnasha* is in Palestinian Aramaic decidedly and unambiguously determinate. The indeterminate form is that found in Dan. vii 13, ܡܫܝܚܐ ܩܝܡܐ. These words together form a *compositum*, which, like any simple noun, is determined by the addition of the emphatic ending ܐܘܪܝܗܐ. 2. In Syriac the combination ܘܡܢ ܘܗܘܐ is ambiguous, and may be used in the (original) determinate sense or in the (weakened) indeterminate sense. 3. The indeterminate sense is 'a man'; the determinate sense, 'the man.' For these meanings the expressions under consideration are the usual ones, and they are used with such constant frequency in these senses that none other can be attributed to them. 4. There can be no practical doubt that *barnasha* is the original of δ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, and is that which was used by Jesus when (if ever) He employed the expression of Himself. 5. The form ܘܗܘܐ ܘܡܢ found in the Syriac Versions, though not grammatically impossible, excites surprise. It does this even in Syriac, but still more in Palestinian Aramaic. Grammatically it is nothing more than a more strongly determined form of *barnasha*. In Syriac the expression avoids the ambiguity which attaches to *barnasha*, and might in a given case be specially employed with that object. In Palestinian Aramaic, where the ambiguity does not exist, it would occasion greater surprise². 6. The distinction made in

¹ This opinion was communicated in conversation, in answer to questions submitted by me, and does not rest on any writing of the Professor's own; but since it was put into writing he has himself kindly confirmed its accuracy.

² Mr. F. Crawford Burkitt, of Cambridge, expresses himself more positively, saying that this phrase is 'just as little native Syriac as "The Son of Man" is English.' He adds, 'Moreover it is not the rendering of O. T. Peshitta in Dan. vii 13, which has *bar 'nāshīn*, which means (if it has any real meaning) "son of some folk."—*Early Christianity outside the Roman Empire*, Two Lectures, 1899, p. 24.

the Syriac Versions between *barnasha* = ὁ ἄνθρωπος, and *brek d'nasha* = ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, is due to the desire of the translator to make a distinction in his translation between distinct expressions in the Greek, whereas the distinctions in the Greek do not represent distinct expressions in the Palestinian Aramaic spoken by Jesus, but only distinct interpretations of one and the same expression, and it is not at all probable that Jesus used *brek d'nasha* in speaking of Himself. On the whole, though Professor Nöldeke was at first inclined against Wellhausen's theory, further consideration had convinced him that the most that could be said was that in the eschatological speeches Jesus might possibly have referred to Himself as *barnasha* (with allusion to Dan. vii 13); but such a use of the phrase by Jesus was only a *possibility*, and Wellhausen *might* be entirely right¹.

It seems, therefore, that we must for the present be content to allow the linguistic argument to remain in suspense; for we do not know either that *barnasha* was in common use in Galilee in the time of Christ, or that Christ might not have adopted *brek d'nasha* to distinguish the Son of Man from others. Consequently, until Aramaic scholars are better agreed among themselves, we are after all thrown back on purely critical considerations. I think, however, we must say that the weight of opinion, and, as far as I am qualified to judge, of probability, is in favour of the view that the original expression translated 'son of man' in the Gospels was *barnasha*. This, whether it was in current use or was only a poetical and prophetic phrase, means simply 'the man.' If, as Dalman supposes, it was not current, it would more easily lend itself to a special interpretation; but, even if it was current, it is surely not impossible that 'the Man,' pronounced with a little emphasis, might be used to denote the figure in Daniel's vision. Our reasoning must, I think, adapt itself to this conclusion.

A critical investigation of the employment of the phrase 'the Son of Man' in the first three Gospels will be attempted in the July number of the Journal.

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¹ In a letter from Mr. Moore, at Strassburg, July 22, 1899.