

Son of Man

Daniel 7:13, "Behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man..."

Question: Is Jesus really fully human *and* fully divine?

Key Verses: Isa 9:6; Mark 14:62; Hebrews 2:6.

"Son of Man"—the Data

"Son of Man" is really a very strange turn of phrase. It's precise meaning is a bit of a mystery so let's start with some clear stats. "Son of Man" is found one-hundred and seven times in the Old Testament. Ninety-four of these uses are in a single book--Ezekiel. It was God's designation for his prophet to remind Ezekiel that he was a mere mortal--warts, pimples, and all. It is not exactly an insult, but neither is it a compliment. The purpose of the appellation is to point out human frailty. The first time we hear it is on the lips of Balaam, a pagan prophet. He speaks on Yahweh's behalf, "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" (Numbers 23:19). We also hear it from a man named Bildad. He was a friend of Job who belittled him saying, "If even the moon is not bright and the stars are not pure in his [God's] eyes, how much less man, who is but a maggot—a son of man, who is only a worm!" (Job 25:5–6). One more illustration will make the point. It comes from the great poem of Psalm 8:4, "What is man that you are mindful of him and the son of man that you care for him?" Again, not an insult, but it certainly puts a person in his place. All told, the term may be endearing but it is not particularly flattering.

This use of "Son of Man" is consistent throughout the entire Old Testament with the single exception of Daniel 7:13. In this unique passage Daniel has a vision. He sees God exalted on his throne. At his right hand suddenly appears a divine figure. The "Son of Man" is brought into God's presence. In a stunning power-move he sits at God's right hand. Verse 14, "He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed." This is quite the conundrum. How can a mere human attain divine status?

This was an on-going conversation among Jewish Rabbis. One of the most famous, Aqiba, commented on the two thrones of Daniel 7:9. He taught that one was for God and the other for David (Talmud, *b. Sanh.* 38b). However, the idea of a human sitting next to God bordered on blasphemous. His fellow rabbi, Yose, rebuked him, "Aqiba, how long will you profane the Divine Presence?" This should give us insight into how difficult it was for Jewish leaders to accept that any human could share any of God's glory. In defense of Aqiba, however, Psalm 122:5 already established a precedent for David's descendent (the Messiah) to share

God's glory: "For there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David." Clearly, God intended for a human to rule and judge alongside himself.

Moving from Daniel to the New Testament there is yet another perplexity. "Son of Man" shows up eighty-five times and it is *always* Jesus. Curiously, every use of "Son of Man" in the New Testament are in the Gospels (except Acts 7:56; Hebrews 2:6; Revelation 1:13; 14:14). Furthermore, every use in the Gospels is not only *about* Jesus, it is *from* Jesus. It is as if only Jesus has the gall to call himself a mere mortal. Conclusion: Only Jesus is the "Son of Man," virtually only Jesus calls himself the son of man, and Jesus calls himself almost nothing else. So if the term is one of denigration, except in Daniel where it implies unprecedented exaltation, how does that jive with Jesus? How can Jesus be the exalted Son of Man who humbles himself on the human plane. That is, precisely, the subtext of the incarnation. It is the promise of the Old Testament, that God would come to his people and change their destiny.

"Son of Man"—the Idea

When we humble ourselves, God exalts us. It is a hard and fast rule in Scripture. Jesus models this spiritual law throughout his life. He came in incarnation and rose in resurrection. He was born in poverty and ascended to a throne. He died on a cross and now wears a crown. "Son of Man" is, in fact, the perfect title for Jesus. Why? By identifying himself with frail and fragile humans, it gives space for God alone to exalt him. As the Apostle Paul says, "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, to the highest place where every knee will bow and every tongue confess him as lord," (Philippians 2:9).

That's why Daniel 7:13 is the only sufficient source for Jesus' self-designation as "Son of Man." It is a title of humility, to be sure. Yet it is also the rightful recognition of his role at God's right hand. This comes into focus when Caiaphas grilled him at his trial. The High Priest demanded an answer, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" The question was a set up. If Jesus says "yes" he will be summarily executed for blasphemy. That's why Jesus responded with a proof-text from Daniel 7:13, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:62/Matt 26:64). This unique combination of sitting at the right hand of "Power" and coming on the clouds of heaven is an unmistakable allusion to Daniel 7:13–14. It is also the necessary background for Jesus coming "in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8:38; see also Matt 10:23; 13:41; 16:28; 24:27, 30, 37, 39, 44; 25:31). Because Jesus knew who he was as God's son, he could identify with, even incarnate into, the human condition without losing sight or hope of his role at God's right hand.

This paradoxical combination of deity and humanity punctuate Jesus' ministry. It began when he healed a paralytic let down through the roof. Jesus said, "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...." (Mark 2:10). Such authority to forgive

sins is reserved for Yahweh. In the same chapter he claims, “The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath,” (Mark 2:28). Think about that for a minute. The Sabbath was established in Eden, not Sinai! Jesus is putting a stake in the ground where only God lays claim. He is claiming the same right as the very God who created the world in the beginning. That’s not all. Not only does he claim authority from Eden, he claims to arbitrate the final judgment in heaven (Matt 13:41; 16:27). More than that, he lays claim to the throne of glory in eternity (Matt 19:28). That is bold in the extreme.

On the other hand, the Son of Man had no place to lay his head (Matt 8:20). He came eating and drinking like every other human (Matt 11:19). He was betrayed by a friend (Matt 26:24, 45) and would suffer at the hands of the Sanhedrin (Mark 8:31; 9:12, 31; 10:33; 14:41). He is, in every way human and claims every right and privilege of the divine. This may come as a shock to you. Nonetheless, how else could the God of the universe relate to, connect with, and communicate with the human population that he loved so desperately. God went to extraordinary lengths to have a relationship with you.

Son of Man—the Consequence

After Jesus’ resurrection, none of the human limitations of the “Son of Man” apply any more. Remember, there are four uses of “Son of Man” after the gospels and each portray him as a divine figure, no longer subject to human frailty. (1) In Acts 7:56 Stephen sees Jesus high and exalted, occupying the throne at God’s right hand. “‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God’.” There it is, the throne promised to the Son of Man in Daniel 7:13. (2) The next citation, from Hebrews 2, is a bit more complex. The author quotes a stanza from Psalm 8. According to the Psalm, though God alone is exalted in heaven, humans are the pinnacle of his creation on earth. They are appointed to rule over all other things God created. Because of sin, however, humanity lost its dignity and aborted our calling to care for creation. We were incapable of accomplishing God’s commission. Therefore, it required a perfect human—a model man—to recover our role by suffering our fate. Jesus took on himself the penalty due us so he could return to us dignity God designed for us. (3) Revelation 1:13 paints Jesus with the same brushstrokes as the Son of Man in Daniel 7:13. Only this time he doesn’t just share God’s throne but his physical features. He too has white hair, blazing eyes, and a voice of thunder (1:14-15). He is the incarnation of Yahweh himself. (4) Similarly, Revelation 14:14 portrays Jesus with the face of God, “I looked, and there before me was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one ‘like a son of man’ with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand.” There is no longer any human frailty. The Son of Man and the God of Creation are one and the same.

For those who grew up in a Christian home, this idea of God becoming a man seems natural and reasonable. For most people, however, this is a nearly impossible idea, especially for Jews and Muslim. If you think about it, they have a point. How could the great God of the

universe squeeze himself into the frailty of humanity? Though it may be difficult to imagine, isn't that the point that God can pull off the impossible? The real question is whether he would want to. To that, we can fully affirm God is both willing and able. In fact, he predicted it. Tucked away in Isaiah chapter 9 is a promise that God would come to us in the form of a man. In 1742, Handel composed an Oratorio from these memorable lines. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace," (Isaiah 9:6). His humanity is obvious: He is a child who eventually becomes the Prince of Peace, ruling God's earthly kingdom. His divinity is undeniable: He is the Mighty God and Everlasting Father.

Jesus incarnation is not just a gift to us, it is a model for us. If we imitate him, our fate will follow his. That is not to say that we will sit on a throne next to God. Rather, it is to say what we lost in our sinful pilgrimage can be recovered through a life of humble service. When we humble ourselves, God will exalt us. When we live among and for other human beings, God will restore us to our former dignity as caretakers of creation.

Key Points:

- "Son of Man" in the Old Testament was a title of human frailty.
- Jesus alone is "Son of Man" in the New Testament. It was his own title for himself.
- Son of Man is the perfect title for Jesus because it demonstrates his humility and leads to God's exaltation. This also sets a precedent for us to follow.

Action Step: Ask someone in your circle of friends what they think God would look like if he came and lived on earth.

Further Resources: St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word of God* (c. 350 A.D.)