

# God Came Down

(The Fourth Gospel)

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## Excursus on: “The Son of Man?”

Jesus repeatedly used the title “the Son of Man” as a self-designation. In John 12:34, the people in Jerusalem ask, “Who is this Son of Man?” The title “the Son of Man” is found in the New Testament in 82 occurrences, all in the Gospels. Eighty occurrences are on the lips of Jesus; the two exceptions are found in the text of John 12, where those hearing Jesus refer to the death of the Son of Man reply, “We have heard from the law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man,” (John 12:34)? The expression Jesus uses, as recorded by John, is the Greek “*ho huios anthropou*,” the same expression as is found in the LXX of Daniel. If Jesus used the Aramaic expression, which is very possible, he would have used same expression as is found in the Aramaic text of Daniel 7, “*Bar Nasha*.” The text of Daniel 7 is in Aramaic rather than Hebrew in the *Biblia Hebrica*, or the traditional Messoritic Text. The title in Hebrew is *Ben Adam*, as is found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

As has been discussed, the earliest use of this expression is that of a poetic metaphor for man as a mortal or human being, an *enoch* (a mortal being), or *adam*, (a man as created in Gen 1-2), one who is from the clay (*adamah*). This is the sense in which this expression is used throughout the Scriptures. Its use in Daniel 7:13-14, however, gives otherworldly characteristics to this being who looks human and is referred to as an offspring of Adam, a *bar nasha* (Aramaic), *ben adam* (Hebrew), or *huios anthropou* (Greek). The Son of Man figure of the Daniel text, however, is given embellishment as a heavenly being, who stands in the very presence of God: he has the appearance of a man or human being (a son of man), he rides on the clouds of heaven, he is in the presence of the Ancient of Days

(God), is brought before or presented to God, who gives him dominion, glory, and a kingdom or reign wherein all people, nations, and languages serve him, his dominion is everlasting and shall not pass away (he is eternal), and his reign or kingdom shall not be destroyed.

***The Son of Man as Ben Adam and  
the Apocalyptic Figure of Daniel 7***

In John, Jesus takes up this expression as a self-designation and uses it as a circumlocution or poetic metaphor of a member of the human race. He is a *Ben Adam*, a human being, an offspring of Adam. But, in a way similar to the son of man figure in Daniel 7, Jesus speaks of himself as a human figure who has come from above, who is to die in his confrontation with evil, and will ascend back to the presence of God who sent him. This can be seen in the following: John 1:51, 3:13, 5:27, 6:27, 53, 62, 8:28, 9:35, 12:23, 34, 34, and 13:31.

Speaking to Nathaniel in John 1:51, Jesus uses the Son of Man title to identify himself as a *Ben Adam* as well as the Daniel 7 apocalyptic figure: “And He said to him, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man’ In John 5:27, we see the same usage; Jesus tells the Jews in Jerusalem,

*Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes in Him who sent me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.<sup>25</sup> Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live.<sup>26</sup> For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself,<sup>27</sup> and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is **the Son of Man**.<sup>28</sup> Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice<sup>29</sup> and come forth--those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation (John 5:24-29).*

There can be little doubt that Jesus is here speaking of the Son of Man as an apocalyptic heavenly figure who has been given authority from God to judge the human race as well as the power to give life to the dead,

both images consistent with the Dan 7 imagery.

The idea of giving life to the dead is also found in 6:27, “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.”

The ascension imagery of the Son of Man riding on the clouds of heaven into the presence of the Ancient of Days (Dan 7:13) is seen in Jesus’ statement of 6:62, “What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before? Then in 9:35 a reference is made to the glorification of the Son of Man, which appears to be Jesus interpretation of Dan 7:14,

*He (the Son of Man) 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 saying is repeated in John 12:23, "The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified," and in 13:31, "Now the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in him," both saying understood as a reference to his crucifixion. It is clear in all these references that Jesus is using the Son of Man figure, drawing on the apocalyptic imagery of Daniel 7, as is found also in the apocalyptic books of 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, and 2 Baruch. The identification of the glorification of the Son of Man with his death on the cross is a creation of which Jesus is himself the architect.

### ***Uniting the Son of Man with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah***

To the *Ben Adam* figure as a member of the human race and the heavenly apocalyptic figure of Daniel 7 are joined to the idea of the Son of Man as one who is glorified by means of death on a cross of crucifixion. This, however, is not an image or motif found in the book of Daniel or the apocalyptic literature. Rather, it is the imagery of the suffering servant figure of Isaiah 52: 13-53:12. To the imagery of the Son of Man as both a mortal man and a heavenly being, Jesus unites the imagery of someone who suffers and dies at the hands of evil forces. This imagery is seen in John 3:13-14; 6:53; 8:28 as well as 12:23 and in 13:31.

In John 3:13, speaking to Nicodemus, Jesus speaks of the Son of Man as someone who has come from the world above, "No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven;" but in verse 14, another piece of imagery is added to it, that of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, "and as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up. Here Jesus is talking about his death, which would be the death of the same Son of Man figure as mentioned in verse 13.

Then, in 6:53, Jesus makes what is, perhaps, his most enigmatic statement concerning the Son of Man. He says to an assembly of pilgrim Jews in route to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." Jesus had fed this same group bread and fish the day before. When he left them, they follow him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee in order to be fed again. Jesus' response upon seeing them was, do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you," (6:27). In the discussion that developed we have what is called Jesus' "Sermon on the Bread of Life," in which he tells them,

*Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. <sup>50</sup>But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. <sup>51</sup>I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world,"* (John 6:49-51).

When the crowd responds by saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Jesus makes the statement, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you," implying that to feast on him is to receive spiritual nourishment from God. An additional possibility here is that Jesus was referring to his identity as the Lamb of God. These people were in route to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast; perhaps, Jesus is suggesting to them that he is the true Passover lamb, whose flesh and blood will be given to deliver the Jews again as did the flesh and blood of the original Passover lamb of the Exodus.

In John 12:23, Jesus, speaking to his disciples and a crowd in Jerusalem, says to them, "The hour has come that the Son of Man should be

glorified.” There is within this text a significant point with reference to the understanding of the identity and nature of the Son of Man common within Jewish thought during Jesus’ ministry. The comment of the crowd in response to Jesus’ statement in 12:23 indicates that there was an understanding on the part of this crowd that the Son of Man figure was an eternal being, as would be consistent with the eternal nature of his kingdom as expressed in Dan 7:14. Jesus’ comments concerning the death of the Son of Man, however, appears to be something with which Jesus’ audience was not familiar.

*Now there were certain Greeks among those who came up to worship at the feast. <sup>21</sup>Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him, saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." <sup>22</sup>Philip came and told Andrew, and in turn Andrew and Philip told Jesus. <sup>23</sup>But Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come that **the Son of Man will be glorified**. <sup>24</sup>Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. <sup>25</sup>He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup>If anyone serves me, let him follow me; and where I am, there my servant will be also. If anyone serves me, him My Father will honor. <sup>27</sup> "Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? "Father, save me from this hour"? But for this purpose I came to this hour. <sup>28</sup>Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, saying, "I have both glorified it and will glorify it again." <sup>29</sup>Therefore the people who stood by and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to Him." <sup>30</sup>Jesus answered and said, "This voice did not come because of me, but for your sake. <sup>31</sup>Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. <sup>32</sup>And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to myself." <sup>33</sup>This He said, signifying by what death He would die. <sup>34</sup>The people answered Him, "We have heard from the law that the Christ remains forever; and how can you say, "The **Son of Man** must be lifted up'? Who is **this Son of Man**?" <sup>35</sup>Then Jesus said to them, "A little while longer the light is with you. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you; he who walks in darkness does not know where he is going. <sup>36</sup>While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light." These things Jesus spoke, and departed, and was hidden from them (John 12:20-36).*

## Conclusion

It appears that this role of the Son of Man is a concept of which Jesus himself is the author. The Son of Man figure in the popular thinking of the apocalyptic movement was that of a *Ben Adam* (a son of Adam), an earthly figure, who was revealed as a heavenly being in Daniel 7, a concept which was greatly embellished upon in 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, and 2 Baruch. The juxtaposition of the human nature of the Son of Man set over against his divine nature is, in the mind of Jesus, to be understood as a comparison rather than a contrast. In Jesus use it become the perfect vehicle to speak of himself as one who was both human and divine.

Jesus' comments concerning the death of the Son of Man appears to be the final touch of the portrait of the Son of Man as Jesus now reveals him. The Son of Man figure we see in the Old Testament and in the apocalyptic literature, especially Daniel 7, reaches its completion in Jesus of Nazareth. The Son of Man's identity, as found on the lips of Jesus, is a concept of which he is both the creator and the fulfillment. What had gone before concerning this somewhat esoteric "thisworldly" and "otherworldly" figure was embraced by Jesus in the glimpses he gives of his true identity to those to whom he revealed himself. The new imagery of the death of this mysterious "thisworldly" and "otherworldly" being was the "messianic secret" of which Jesus himself was the revealer and revelation. That revelation was that the Son of Man figure Jesus represented was "one of us," but he was more in that he was "God with us;" but even more, as a representative of both man and God, he died as one of us and arose in conquest of death for us and for our deliverance from our mortality as the sons of Adam and the estranged sons created in the image of God.

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