

Summing Up and Concluding Observations¹

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Part of my task in this concluding chapter is to note where we are in discussion of the thorny issues connected with ‘the Son of Man’ expression in the Gospels, especially in light of the foregoing contributions to this book. I will also offer a few observations of my own, and conclude by indicating what I think is the most reasonable proposal as to origins of this expression. As an *entree*, it may be helpful to review the main data that provoke and puzzle, and continue to generate the efforts of scholars to propose solutions for them. As I will argue below, I think that a clear and sustained engagement with the data is essential, and may enable some progress in understanding things.

‘Just the Facts, Ma’am’²

As with any really important problem, so in the case of the one before us there are data that require to be engaged and explained. Especially in light of the many theories and proposals generated, it is well to have these data clearly in mind. We are concerned essentially with usages of key expressions in certain ancient Greek texts. Even though Semitic-language constructions typically underlie (or are commonly thought to underlie) all the Greek expressions in question, it is the usage of these latter that provides the starting point for analysis.³

To clarify one point at the outset, ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου is not an expression that is native to, or common in, ancient Greek. With the benefit of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, it is possible to verify this readily. Simply put, there is no instance of the singular or plural form of this construction, anarthrous or articular, in extant Greek literature outside of the LXX, the NT, Philo (*Vit. Mos.* 1.283), and subsequent texts that show the influence of the LXX and/or NT. That is, all uses of this particular Greek

¹ This is the pre-publication version of my essay, ‘Summary and Concluding Observations’, published in *Who is This Son of Man? The Latest Scholarship on a Puzzling Expression of the Historical Jesus*, eds. Larry W. Hurtado and Paul L. Owen (LNTS 390; London: T&T Clark, 2011), 159-77.

² I beg the indulgence of readers in this allusion to the most famous ever detective series on American radio and TV, ‘Dragnet’. For those unfamiliar with the series and the unforgettable Jack Webb, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dragnet_\(series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dragnet_(series)).

³ See also my previous discussion of these matters in *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 290-306.

expression appear in texts of ancient Jewish provenance or influenced heavily by Jewish texts.⁴ To be sure, these expressions are all framed in understandable Greek vocabulary and syntax, but they are simply not ones that came naturally on the lips of native Greek speakers/writers uninfluenced by the Greek OT and Jewish tradition.

The Greek Old Testament

By contrast, in the LXX I count some 166 instances of various forms of the singular or plural ‘son of man’ and ‘sons of men’.⁵ These all reflect, either directly (translation) or indirectly (Semitic phrasing exerting influence on writers of Greek), equivalent Hebrew or Aramaic expressions, which are thoroughly idiomatic in both Semitic languages. Nearly all the LXX uses are in texts known to have been translated from Hebrew or Aramaic.⁶ This is a boon for any interest in how the relevant Semitic expressions were handled when translated. The *general* observation to make is that the various LXX translators appear to have rendered the underlying Hebrew and Aramaic expressions faithfully, sometimes even somewhat woodenly.

For example, the singular and plural forms of the Semitic expressions are carefully rendered by corresponding forms in Greek. So, the fifty-four instances of the plural ‘(the) sons of men’ (υἱοὶ ἀνθρώπων / οἱ υἱοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων) in the LXX all seem to translate equivalent Hebrew plural forms. The typical Hebrew expression translated is the plural, בני אדם, but in a number of instances it is בני האדם (i.e., with the article, Psa. 33:13; 145:12, and 10x in Ecclesiastes), and occasionally בני איש (Psa. 4:2; 62:10 [LXX 61:10]). The LXX translators typically preferred to translate these Hebrew plural expressions with οἱ υἱοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων (i.e., with definite articles before each noun, 27x), less frequently using υἱοὶ ἀνθρώπων (i.e., without any article, 17x), and one instance of υἱοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων (Odes Sol. 8.82, perhaps a rather wooden translation of the

⁴ Our editions of the LXX rest mainly upon Christian copies of the Greek OT writings (from the third century CE and later), and we have only limited evidence of the pre-LXX Greek OT. But there is no reason to think that ‘Old Greek’ translators differed greatly in their rendering of the phrases in question. Hence, for economy of expression, in the following discussion I shall refer to LXX translators, meaning the translators whose work is preserved for us in our editions of the LXX.

⁵ In the following discussion, I draw upon results using *BibleWorks for Windows* (version 4.0), counting instances found in standard printed editions of the LXX and Greek NT.

⁶ The few possible exceptions include Wis 9.6 (‘sons of men’), on the common assumption that Wisdom of Solomon was composed in Greek. In this case, we have here an instance of someone writing in Greek but consciously or unconsciously reflecting a Semitic idiom.

underlying Hebrew construct form). However, in LXX Ecclesiastes we find υἱοὶ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου (6x) and οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου (4x), the underlying Hebrew in all these ten instances being בני האדם. As to why the LXX translators preferred one or the other Greek phrasing, the matter need not detain us here. Basically, it seems that the alternative Greek expressions carried a sufficiently similar sense, the choices reflecting efforts by LXX translators to render Semitic constructions for which there were not already direct equivalents in use native to Greek.

There are some 112 instances of the singular forms for ‘(a) son of man’ in the LXX, each of these faithfully rendering a corresponding Hebrew (or Aramaic) singular form. Ninety-four of these are the vocative singular (υἱε ἀνθρώπου) in Ezekiel, rendering the peculiarly frequent use of ‘son of man’ as the expression by which *Yahweh* addresses the prophet. It is noteworthy that each of these 112 singular forms in the LXX is ‘anarthrous’ (no definite article), e.g., υἱός ἀνθρώπου in Psalm 8.4/LXX 8.5, accurately reflecting in each instance the Hebrew (or Aramaic) expressions. In nearly all instances the Hebrew is בן אדם (e.g., Num. 23.19; Psa. 8.4; Jer. 2.6), the exceptions being Psalm 80.16/LXX 79.16 (בן אמעצתה, ‘the son you have reared’), Psalm 144.3/LXX 143.3 (בן אנוש) Jeremiah 2.6 (אדם), and of course the Aramaic expression in Daniel 7.13 (בר אנוש).

We can now draw some summarizing observations from these details. First, the singular form, ‘son of man’, is consistently without an article in the Hebrew texts of the OT (and in its few OT instances in Aramaic does not have the final *alpha* that would give a corresponding definite sense to a noun).⁷ Thus, as far as the evidence of the Hebrew OT and other second-temple Jewish literature is concerned, it appears that the articular form ‘the son of man’ was not a familiar expression, in Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek, in the period in which these writings were composed.⁸ There is certainly no basis for thinking that the Semitic articular/definite forms were used somewhat interchangeably with the

⁷ There is one apparent instance where a copyist has added the definite article in the Qumran manuscript, 1QS (11.20), producing בן האדם. For discussion, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, ‘The New Testament Title “The Son of Man” Philologically Considered’, in *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays* (SBLMS 25; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 143-60, esp. 146.

⁸ See the evidence cited by Paul Owen and David Shepherd, ‘Speaking Up for Qumran, Dalman and the Son of Man: Was *Bar Enasha* a Common Term for “Man” in the Time of Jesus?’ *JSNT* 81 (2001): 81-122, esp. 104-20. Note also that in the Aramaic fragments of *I Enoch* there are no instances of the definite-singular form of ‘son of man’. J. T. Milik (ed.), *The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments of Qumran Cave 4* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 371, s.v. בר.

anarthrous/indefinite forms of the expressions involved. Instead, the impression given is that the articular/definite singular expression, ‘the son of man’, would have been regarded as highly unusual, perhaps even peculiar.

Second, and perhaps as interesting, although the LXX translators often supplied definite articles in rendering plural forms (‘the sons of men’), including instances where the Hebrew construction has no article (e.g., Psa 11.4/LXX 10.4), they rather consistently refrained from doing so in translating these many instances of singular forms. Even in cases where it would seem fully appropriate to have supplied the definite article in the interest of conveying the connotation of a given sentence, and where subsequent translators often have done so (e.g., Psa. 8.4; 80.17/LXX 79.16; 144.3/LXX 143.3), the LXX translators scrupulously refrained from adding a definite article to ‘son of man’, retaining the indefinite forms of the various underlying Semitic expressions. Perhaps the articular form, ‘the son of man’, seemed still more strange in Greek than the indefinite (anarthrous) form. In any case, based on this evidence we should be cautious in ascribing to ancient Greek translators of Hebrew and/or Aramaic a readiness to supply a definite article to instances of ‘son of man’ where there was none in the underlying Semitic being translated.

The New Testament

Now let us turn now to the data pertaining directly to NT texts. The first thing to note is the surprising frequency of, and preference for, the articular-singular expression ‘the son of man’ (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου), some eighty instances, seventy-nine of them in the Gospels and once in Acts (7:56). In addition, we have a few uses of the anarthrous singular form, υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου (in Heb 2.6, where it is part of a quotation of Psa 8.4, and in Rev 1:13; 14.14, both of these likely allusive to Daniel 7.13). Clearly, we are looking at an expression that is very unusual and plays some sort of important role in the vocabulary of the intra-canonical Gospels in particular.⁹

Moreover, nearly all of these articular-singular instances are in sayings ascribed to Jesus, and ‘the son of man’ is his typical self-designation, especially prominently in the Synoptic Gospels. Other characters in the Gospels, however, basically do not use the

⁹ The plural form, ‘the sons of men’, is used only twice in the NT (Mark 3.28; Eph 3.6).

expression, with reference to anyone. No one ever acclaims Jesus as ‘the son of man’. Nor does his use of the expression ever generate controversy or accusation. The closest that we have to an exception is John 12.34, where the Jewish crowd is portrayed as asking Jesus what he means by referring to ‘the son of man’. But the impression given here is that the crowd simply finds the expression novel and they are unsure what to make of it. ‘The son of man’ is not itself an honorific claim here that the crowd recognizes or contests.¹⁰ Among the several positive estimates of Jesus ascribed to people in the Gospels narratives (e.g., Mark 8.27-29, John the Baptist, Elijah, a prophet, Messiah), ‘the son of man’ is totally absent as an option. Nor is ‘the son of man’ among the confessional titles accorded Jesus elsewhere in the NT (e.g., ‘Lord’, ‘Christ’, ‘the Son of God’).¹¹ So, we cannot account readily for the expression as some regular feature of early Christian kerymatic or confessional usage that was retrojected back into the narratives about the earthly Jesus.

It is also interesting to note the variation in frequency and usage of the expression among the Gospels. Matthew leads in frequency (30x), and deploys the expression uniquely in some sayings with parallels in the other Synoptics where the expression is not used. Compare, in particular, Matthew’s use of ‘the son of man’ in Jesus’ question to his disciples near Caesarea Philippi concerning what people are saying about him (16.13) with the use of the first-person pronoun in the parallels in Mark 8.27; Luke 9.18. Compare also the reference to ‘the son of man’ enthroned Matthew 19.28 with the Luke 18.30 parallel, which lacks this image (referring instead to ‘my table’ and ‘my kingdom’). Matthew alone refers to ‘the coming of the son of man’ (ἡ παρουσία τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, 24.27, 37, 39; and cf. also 10.23; 25.31), and to ‘the sign of the son of man’ (τὸ σημεῖον τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, 24.30). In addition, though most of the relevant sayings in Matthew have parallels in one or more of the other Synoptics, there are a few other sayings unique to Matthew in which ‘the son of man’ features: 10.23; 13.37; 26.2b.

¹⁰ Cf., e.g., the excited questions over whether Jesus might be a prophet or even ‘the Christ’ (John 7.40-44; 10.24) and the accusation that he ‘made himself the Son of God’ (19.7).

¹¹ The statement ascribed to Stephen in Acts 7.56 is not a real exception. In the wider context of Luke-Acts, ‘the son of man’ is already known to readers as Jesus’ characteristic self-designation. So Stephen is pictured here as claiming that the one known (to readers and to the opponents in the scene) by the sobriquet ‘the son of man’ has been exalted to heavenly glory.

On the other hand, whereas Luke 12:8 promises that ‘the son of man’ will acknowledge those who confess Jesus, Matthew 10.32 simply has Jesus give this assurance using the first-person pronoun and verb (ὁμολήσω κἀγω), and where the other Synoptics have Jesus teach his disciples ‘that the son of man must suffer many things’ (Mark 8.31; Luke 9.22), Matthew 16.21 has ‘Jesus Christ’ show them ‘that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things’. Nevertheless, the expression ‘the son of man’ is clearly prominent in Matthew’s presentation of Jesus, and serves as the author’s favored way of representing Jesus’ self-designation.

Next in frequency is Luke (23x). Here again, there are interesting distinguishing features to the Lukan usage of the expression. Luke alone refers to ‘the day(s) of the son of man’ (17.22, 30). Luke 6.22 uniquely refers to persecution of Jesus’ followers ‘on account of the son of man’ (cf. Matt 5.11). In addition, there are a few other sayings about ‘the son of man’ exclusive to Luke (18.8; 19.10; 22.48; 24.7, the angels at the tomb here echoing Jesus’ saying from 9.22).

The fourteen son-of-man sayings in Mark nearly all have parallels in Matthew and/or Luke, which is consistent with the common view that Mark was the principal source and precedent for the authors of the other Synoptics, Markan material heavily appropriated by the other two Synoptic Evangelists.¹² The possible exception is in 9.12, where Jesus says that ‘it has been written concerning the son of man’ that he should suffer. There is no Lukan parallel, and Matthew 17.13 has a comparable saying about ‘the son of man’ but worded differently.

For its size, John uses the expression less intensively (12x, plus one anarthrous construction in 5.27), and the explicit emphasis on Jesus’ divine sonship is clearly more prominent.¹³ Nevertheless, ‘the son of man’ still plays a significant role in John. Indeed, in John the expression is used quite distinctively.¹⁴ None of the Johannine sentences in which ‘the son of man’ features has an obvious or direct parallel in the Synoptic Gospels.

¹² Mark 2.10/Matt 9.6/Luke 5.24; Mark 2.28/Matt 12.8/Luke 6.5; Mark 8.31/Luke 9.22 (cf. Matt 16.21); Mark 8.38/Luke 9.26; Mark 9.9/Matt 17.9; Mark 9.31/Matt 17.22/Luke 9.44; Mark 10.33/Matt 20.18/Luke 18.31; Mark 10.45/Matt 20.28; Mark 13.26/Matt 24.30/Luke 21.27; Mark 14.21/Matt 26.24/Luke 22.22; Mark 14.41/Matt 26.45; Mark 14.62/Matt 26.64/Luke 22.69.

¹³ In contrast to the twelve uses of ‘the son of man’ in John, I count at least six uses of ‘the son of God’, and another fifteen references to ‘the Son’ (of course, the latter all affirmations of Jesus’ divine sonship).

¹⁴ Cf. the essay on use of ‘the son of man’ in John by Benjamin E. Reynolds in this volume; and also Delbert Burkett, *The Son of Man in the Gospel of John*, JSNTSup 56 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991).

In John, we have sentences referring to angels descending and ascending on ‘the son of man’ (1.51), the descent (from heaven) and ascent of ‘the son of man’ (3.13-14; 6.62), his giving food of eternal life and his own flesh and blood (6.27, 53), ‘the son of man’ being ‘lifted up’ (8.28) and glorified (12.23; 13.21), and even a probable reference to belief in ‘the son of man’ (9.35).¹⁵ Clearly, the sentences in which the author deploys the expression ‘the son of man’ comprise a unique body of material in this unique Gospel.

Indeed, I suggest that this sharply distinctive use of ‘the son of man’ in John is perhaps particularly valuable in demonstrating for us the function and significance of this expression in the NT writings. We have noted already that even among the individual Synoptics there are some distinctive sentences or phrases in which the expression is deployed. But in John it is more boldly and thoroughly used in a body of statements that reflect explicitly the distinctive emphases of this Gospel. The variations in the usage of ‘the son of man’ in the Synoptics, including particularly the apparent freedom of Synoptic authors to use ‘the son of man’ and the first-person pronoun somewhat interchangeably in sayings of Jesus, suggests that in these texts it functions simply (or at least primarily) as a unique self-referential expression. I propose that this is rather more obviously shown in John, where the expression is deployed entirely in sayings that reflect this author’s particular christological emphases.

That is, I submit that the diversity of sentences/sayings in which ‘the son of man’ is used in the Gospels leads to the conclusion that in these texts the expression’s primary linguistic function is to *refer, not to characterize*.¹⁶ The expression refers to Jesus (and almost entirely in sentences where it is used as a self-designation), but does not *in itself* primarily make a claim about him, or generate any controversy, or associate him with prior/contextual religious expectations or beliefs. ‘The son of man’ can be used in sayings that stake various claims about Jesus (e.g., Jesus’ authority, or humble situation, or heavenly provenance, or eschatological significance), but it is the *sentence/saying* that conveys the intended claim or statement, *not ‘the son of man’ expression itself*.

¹⁵ The widely-supported variant, ‘the son of God’, in 9.35 is quite likely an effort to align Jesus’ question here with more a common early Christian confessional claim.

¹⁶ I employ here some elementary insights about language from linguistics, a subject with which NT remain surprisingly ill-informed. For a helpful *entrée*, see John Lyons, *Language and Linguistics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

With genuine respect for the many scholars who have done so, it is, nevertheless, a linguistic fallacy to impute to the expression ‘the son of man’ the meanings of the various statements in which it is used. Instead, we are to attribute to *the referent*, Jesus, the import of these sentences. As an analogy, let us consider the statement, ‘The professor is compassionate’. In this statement, compassion is ascribed to a particular figure referred to as ‘the professor’; but the word ‘professor’ itself does not thereby carry (or acquire) the meaning ‘compassionate’. ‘The professor’ designates and even classifies a given person as holding a particular professional role, but the term itself does not acquire the attribute ascribed to this particular professor. So, for example, to treat ‘the son of man’ as if in itself it ‘means’ a figure of authority (on the basis of sayings such as Mark 2.10), or of humility (on the basis of sayings such as Matt 8.20/Luke 9.58), or eschatological judge (on the basis of Matt 25.31), or a heavenly being (on the basis of John 3.13-14), or even the figure of Daniel 7.13 (on the basis of Mark 14.62/Matt 26.64) would all represent the fallacious move that I identify here. For emphasis, I repeat that in all the Gospels sayings, the function of ‘the son of man’ expression is essentially to refer to Jesus as the figure about whom the sentence says something. The particular ‘meaning’ of each statement/saying lies in the statement, not in the expression ‘the son of man’. In short, Jesus (as portrayed in the sayings/sentences in question) defines ‘the son of man’; ‘the son of man’ designates but does not define Jesus.

Of course, ‘the son of man’ is a particularizing form of an idiomatic expression with broad inherent meaning. Any study of the uses of the singular and plural forms of ‘son of man’ in the OT will show readily that in the relevant Semitic languages these expressions connoted, singly or collectively, human beings, members of the human species (and so the mysterious figure in Dan 7.13 likened to a human in the phrase, ‘one like a son of man’). The unusual articular-singular form so frequently and consistently used in the Gospels, ‘the son of man’, probably connotes further a certain particularity or specificity. So, in the Gospels ‘the son of man’ may convey something like ‘the man’ or even ‘this man’.¹⁷ If this seems an unusual expression in English, especially as a self-designation, it appears that it was equally unusual and curious in biblical Hebrew, in the

¹⁷ The Greek definite article, which originated as a demonstrative pronoun, retains something of this quasi-demonstrative sense in Koine Greek. See, e.g., C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 106-17, esp. 111.

Aramaic of Jesus' time, and in Koine Greek, to judge from the scarcity of any occurrence of the fully equivalent expression in any of these languages outside of the Gospels.¹⁸

But the sheer diversity of sentences in which the Evangelists used 'the son of man', and the instances where they felt free to use the personal pronoun interchangeably with the expression, surely show that it did not have for them some precise and fixed meaning (or fixed set of meanings). Instead, these authors knew the expression essentially (and in all likelihood solely) as the distinctive way that Jesus typically referred to himself, and so deployed it accordingly when they sought to represent Jesus uttering sayings that included a self-reference. The imprint of this peculiar expression as distinctive to Jesus' usage is evident is found frequently in all four Gospels, and even in sayings that are widely thought to derive from the sayings-source, *Q*.¹⁹ But other than this function of the expression as Jesus' unique self-referential device reflecting some sort of emphasis on him as a particular human being, the expression 'the son of man' has little by way of inherent christological meaning.

In later/other early Christian texts, to be sure, 'the son of man' takes on more confessional significance.²⁰ In early orthodox circles, for example, it was used to emphasize Jesus' human nature in comparison with his divine nature (typically expressed by use of the title 'the Son of God').²¹ But I contend that 'the son of man' does not really function as a christological title in first-century Christian texts, and that it is a mistake to seek to assign to it some precise 'meaning' or set of meanings.²² Instead, it functions essentially as a unique self-designation of Jesus and is deployed in sentences which ascribe this or that action, significance or attribute to the figure referred to as 'the son of man'.

¹⁸ Given the controversy over relevant Aramaic expressions, I emphasise here that we have no instances of the definite-singular in Aramaic texts of the second-temple period. I do not consider instances in texts of several centuries earlier or later to be probative of Aramaic usage of the time of Jesus and the Evangelists.

¹⁹ Cf. the single instance of the equivalent Coptic expression in *Gospel of Thomas* 86, which is a version of the saying found also in Matt 8.20/Luke 9.58.

²⁰ Frederick H. Borsch, *The Son of Man in Myth and History* (London: SCM Press, 1967) surveys uses of the expression in early orthodox and heterodox Christian circles/texts.

²¹ As noted also by Reynolds in his essay in this volume, who cites Ignatius (*Eph* 20.2), Justin (*Dial* 100.3-4), Irenaeus (*AdvHaer* 3.10.2; 16.3, 7; 18.3-4; 19.1-2), and *Barn* 12.10.

²² It will be clear, thus, that I do not find persuasive the sort of approach taken, e.g., by Reynolds in his study of Johannine uses of 'the son of man' in this volume.

Origins

The obvious other question is how to account for this expression and its prominence in the Gospels. I suggest that there have been two types of scholarly proposals about the origins of ‘the son of man’ expression, some attributing it to Jesus, others to the early church, and both types remain advocated in current discussion.²³ In what follows, I assess briefly main current options of each type, especially taking account of the other contributions to this volume.

Several decades ago, Norman Perrin, argued that the expression ‘the son of man’ arose through a creative early Christian exegetical move in which the ‘one like a son of man’ in Daniel 7.13 was identified as the risen/exalted Jesus.²⁴ Perrin found his evidence in the rather obvious allusion to Daniel 7.13 in Mark 14.62 and parallels, where Jesus is portrayed as affirming that ‘the son of man’ will be seen seated a God’s right hand and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven’. Perrin argued that this saying was put into the mouth of Jesus, but actually originated in early Christian ‘*peshet*’ activity driven by christological interests. Then, from this initial move, ‘the son of man’ expression quickly came to be deployed more widely in a variety of sayings in the Jesus-tradition. More recently, in his survey of scholarship on the expression, Delbert Burkett seems to lean toward a somewhat similar view, with some slight hesitation.²⁵

But all such proposals that ‘the son of man’ originated in early Christian circles and expressed some christological conviction about Jesus seem to me to ignore, and so to founder on, a rather important datum. As we have noted already, there is no evidence that ‘the son of man’ functioned in the proclamation, confession or liturgical practices of any first-century Christian circle, at least to judge from the available texts. Instead, the sole place of the expression is in sayings of Jesus, where it seems to serve simply as a distinctive self-referential formula. By contrast, in the case of ‘Messiah/Christ’ or ‘Son of God’, we clearly have christological titles that were central in early Christian

²³ See the fuller review of previous scholarship by Delbert Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate: A History and Evaluation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), who similarly judged that ‘the bulk of scholarship is now divided between two basic alternatives’: the expression originated either with Jesus’ own use of an Aramaic equivalent, or as a messianic title applied to Jesus either by himself or the early church (122).

²⁴ Norman Perrin, ‘Mark 14:62: The End Product of a Christian Peshet Tradition?’, *NTS* 12 (1965-1966): 150-55.

²⁵ Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate*, esp. 122-24.

discourse, and that also laid claims about Jesus that were recognizable in the settings of first-century Christian circles. In principle, therefore, it is fully reasonable to consider whether one or both of these latter titles may have been heightened in the Gospels narratives of Jesus (or even read back into them), the Evangelists thereby linking these narratives somewhat with the discourse and beliefs of the first readers.²⁶ But in the case of ‘the son of man’ we are not dealing with the same sort of item. ‘The son of man’ is a fixed expression and has a prominent and distinctive function in the Gospels, but it is simply not a christological title.

Burkett suggested that the absence of the expression in the NT outside of the Gospels (and the one Acts passage) could be accounted for ‘if the title had currency primarily in Palestinian Christianity’. Granting that the NT generally reflects ‘Hellenistic Christianity outside of Palestine’, nevertheless, he judged that the Gospels and early chapters in Acts ‘retain traces of Palestinian tradition’. So, he contended, ‘the son of man’ appears in the NT precisely where we should expect it.²⁷

But this argument does not convince. Certainly, the Gospel narratives are set in Roman Judea (Palestine), but it is dubious to suggest that they therefore reflect and preserve the beliefs and supposedly distinctive discourse of ‘Palestinian Christianity’. The Gospels are late first-century accounts of Jesus that are each intended to be meaningful for readers of that time and in the various settings in which they were read.²⁸ The authors sought to connect these readers with Jesus, not particularly with ‘Palestinian Christianity’. So, they deployed the expression ‘the son of man’ apparently because in the traditions they drew upon it was already a distinctive mark of Jesus’ own sayings, not because it was supposedly a feature of ‘Palestinian’ Christian christological confession.

The early chapters of Acts are presented as reflecting the earliest days of the young Christian movement in Jerusalem and related areas, which makes it all the more

²⁶ I neither offer nor imply any judgement about whether this happened, only that it is reasonable to consider the matter.

²⁷ Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate*, 123.

²⁸ I side-step here the issue raised by Richard Bauckham over whether the Gospels were originally written for some specific church or geographical/cultural setting. See Richard Bauckham, ‘For Whom Were the Gospels Written?’, in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 9-48. Whatever the force of Bauckham’s argument, the Gospels quickly circulated among various churches, but clearly among Greek-reading circles and well beyond ‘Palestinian Christianity’.

interesting that ‘the son of man’ does not feature in the representations of early Jewish-Christian proclamation and confession. The one instance of the expression on the lips of Stephen in Acts 7.56 is obviously one feature of the author’s larger presentation of Stephen’s martyrdom as echoing Jesus’ interrogation and death. So, in 7.56 we have an allusion back to Luke 22.69, where Jesus predicts that ‘the son of man’ will be seen at the right hand of God in heavenly glory. This sole instance of the expression scarcely suffices to show that it functioned as a christological title in ‘Palestinian’ Christian circles of the time. In short, Burkett actually presupposes the very thing that needs to be shown—that ‘the son of man’ was ever used as a christological title in confession and/or proclamation, among early Jewish believers or any others.

Perrin, Burkett, and others who ascribe the expression to the early church tend to posit Daniel 7.13 as the crucial biblical text that provided the exegetical point of origin. Unquestionably, Daniel 7.13-14 was drawn on and alluded to in several NT texts (esp. Mark 14/62/Matt 26.64; Mark 13.26/Matt 24.30/ Luke 21.27; Rev 1.7). But it does not seem to me that Daniel 7.13 was quite as crucial in framing the christological convictions of the early church as would seem to be required/presumed in the sort of proposal supported by Burkett. Other OT texts seem to have been far more crucial (especially Psa 110).²⁹ Moreover, if ‘the son of man’ originated via pondering OT texts, there are actually other texts as well that could have served to suggest the expression. These include Psalm 8.4; 80.18/LXX 79.18, the latter interestingly combining a reference to ‘the man at your [God’s] right hand’ and ‘the son of man’.

Other scholars, e.g., Darrell Bock in his contribution to this volume, have proposed that Daniel 7.13 was particularly important *to Jesus* in framing his self-understanding, and that ‘the son of man’ may have originated as his somewhat veiled device for linking himself with the mysterious figure in Daniel 7. I grant that it is entirely appropriate to explore how Jesus might have drawn upon his biblical heritage in framing his understanding of his own particular mission and role in the divine plan. Also, I think that it is fully plausible that Jesus could have made the sort of claim, involving an allusion to Daniel 7.13-14, that we have reflected in the scene of Jesus’ interrogation by

²⁹ David M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973).

the Jewish authorities (Mark 14.62). But I am not persuaded that the expression ‘the son of man’ originated through Jesus perceiving Daniel 7.13 as the crucial text in forming his self-understanding and his use of the expression.

One important reason, again, is the lack of evidence that ‘the son of man’ functioned as a claim made by believers about Jesus’ significance in first-century Christian texts. If ‘the son of man’ originated in Jesus’ pondering of Daniel 7.13-14 and served in particular as his device to affirm his identify as the human-like figure of that passage, it is very curious that this expression was not then taken up in early Christian proclamation and confession. Why would early Christians have dropped or ignored the expression, if it had served in Jesus’ own teaching to identify himself as the exalted being in the Daniel passage? If the expression was a ‘veiled’ way of making this claim in the time of Jesus’ own ministry, in the post-Easter situation of overt proclamation of Jesus we should expect a clear and forthright proclamation that Jesus is specifically ‘the son of man’ of that passage. But there is scant indication that the expression ‘the son of man’ functioned in making any such claim in early Christian proclamation. Jesus’ allusion to Daniel 7.13-14 in the scenes of his interrogation before the Jewish authorities will hardly serve by itself as sufficient evidence of early Jewish Christian confessional use of ‘the son of man’.

The other major approach in contemporary scholarly discussion is to take ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου as deriving from Jesus’ use of one or more equivalent expressions in Aramaic, but not as a pointer to Daniel 7. There are different options offered. One option is to posit that Jesus used an idiomatic Aramaic expression that was putatively a common way of referring to someone else or to oneself. Among current exponents of this sort of view, Maurice Casey is probably the most prominent, and certainly the most vigorous.³⁰ This is reflected in the attention given to his work in several of the essays in this volume (especially the contributions by Albert Lukaszewski, Paul Owen, David Shepherd, and P. J. Williams). The particular wrinkle in Casey’s approach is his

³⁰ See now especially, Maurice Casey, *The Solution to the ‘Son of Man’ Problem* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), which consolidates work from a number of his earlier publications. Casey’s confidence in his proposal is reflected in the title of this book: ‘*The Solution*’! This basic approach was brought to renewed attention by Geza Vermes, initially in his essay, ‘The Use of *Bar Nasha/Bar Nash* in Jewish Aramaic’, in Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (3rd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 310-30.

insistence that the definite singular form, בַּר אֲנִישָׁא, was an Aramaic idiomatic expression that did not necessarily carry a particularizing force, and was simply a common way for a speaker to refer to someone (including oneself) as a human person. Casey further proposes that the Greek expression, ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, originated as a rather literal translation of this definite-form Aramaic expression, the early Christian translators thereby introducing innocently a particularizing force into the Greek phrasing that was not connoted in the Aramaic equivalent. This, Casey further proposes, then contributed to the Greek for ‘the son of man’ becoming a title as applied to Jesus, as it came to reflect the kind of uniqueness that early Christians quickly wished to ascribe to him.

But, as was pointed out forcefully by Owen and Shepherd several years ago, it is a major problem for Casey’s argument that there is no evidence for a common use of the definite-singular expression, בַּר אֲנִישָׁא in extant Aramaic texts of the second-temple period and Palestinian provenance.³¹ The essays by Owen and Shepherd in this volume reiterate their forceful argument, and engage Casey further and effectively in my view. This lack of evidence of the definite-singular form in second-temple Aramaic texts is also consistent with the lack of any instance of the articular-singular form of the Hebrew equivalent (בֶּן הָאָדָם) in the Hebrew OT. For reasons that are not entirely clear, thus, it seems that the definite-singular in Aramaic (as the case for the equivalent in Hebrew) in fact was *not* in use, or at least not used with sufficient frequency to have left instances in the available evidence of Aramaic of Jesus’ time.

Casey points to instances from centuries before or after the second-temple period, and insists that in this particular idiomatic expression Aramaic remained constant across several hundred years and various locales. This is, of course, a possibility, but assertion does not comprise evidence, and repeated assertion does not increase the probative force of the claim. It would be equally plausible to think that, as with living languages generally, Aramaic changed across centuries of time. It is certainly the case that there were various regional dialects of Aramaic. Moreover, although the extant body of Aramaic texts from roughly Jesus’ time and geographical setting is frustratingly limited, we cannot ignore or downplay the absence of evidence that the definite-singular equivalent of ‘the son of man’ was a common idiom. Indeed, Casey’s claim that this

³¹ Owen and Shepherd, ‘Speaking Up for Qumran’.

expression was common and unremarkable in Aramaic usage of Jesus' setting actually makes the absence of supporting evidence all the more serious for his position. Instances of an unusual and infrequently used expression might not have been preserved in the modest-size body of first-century Aramaic. But the total lack of any instance of a supposedly common idiomatic expression is very strange indeed, and I do not think that Casey's efforts to deflect the force of this lack have been persuasive.

Williams' essay reflects doubt about Casey's position similar to that expressed by Owen and Shepherd. Williams makes the further valid point that one can connote particularity in various ways, in ancient Aramaic and other languages. So, even if Casey were correct in his claims about the usage of the definite-singular form, *בר אנשא*, there were other means by which Jesus could have connoted a particularizing force in his self-references. Lukazzewski expresses a broader hesitation about our ability to make confident claims about the details of first-century Aramaic, the effect of his argument being to cast doubts on the sort of efforts that Casey and others before him have made to retro-translate the Gospels sayings back into Aramaic. Given the sort of caution expressed by Lukaszewski, these efforts can be regarded as interesting exercises, but they carry very limited probative force. Further, the very weak basis for these efforts should make us cautious about pronouncing on the historicity of individual sayings, or positing some distinctive meaning of them, on the basis of retro-translation. But this point takes us beyond 'the son of man' debate and into the wider efforts of Casey and others to use retro-translation as a basis for critical judgements about the Jesus-tradition.³²

In light of the linguistic data we have surveyed, thus, I am led to give renewed support for the proposal I offered in a previous discussion of 'the son of man' issue published in 2003.³³ That proposal is that *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου* likely represents a careful translation of an equivalent, unusual and distinctive Aramaic expression, probably *בר אנשא*. This singular-definite form of the more familiar Semitic idiom for referring to someone as a human, *בר אנש* ('a son of man'), was retained and deployed exclusively in sayings ascribed to Jesus in the early decades, because the expression was regarded

³² See also the earlier cautionary discussion by Loren T. Stuckenbruck, 'An Approach to the New Testament Through Aramaic Sources: The Recent Methodological Debate', *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 8 (1991): 3-29.

³³ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 290-306..

reverentially as Jesus' own distinctive way of referring to himself. It did not represent some established title in Jewish tradition, nor did it comprise some new Christological title, and so did not claim for Jesus some honorific status. Instead, it functioned in the tradition drawn upon in the Gospels simply as Jesus' preferred self-referential device.³⁴ In Aramaic, there was a particularizing force to this unusual singular-definite expression, as there was in the articular-singular Greek translation, ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. That is, the expression designated Jesus in particular, and it could be deployed in any statement intended to make reference to Jesus.

I further propose that the most likely reason that the Jesus-tradition linked Jesus so closely and uniquely with the expression is that he actually used it. That is, Jesus likely made בר אנשא his preferred self-designation, which formed a salient feature of his own speech-practice, his 'voice' or manner of speaking, in linguistic terms, his 'idiolect'.³⁵ This would be an example of what competent users of languages often do, adapting idiomatic expressions, either in form or connotation, to serve some new and particular semantic purpose.³⁶

The obvious next question is what might have prompted Jesus to formulate and deploy so regularly this apparently unusual expression with its particularizing implication. We have already noted the proposal that 'the son of man' originated through Jesus identifying himself with the human-like figure of Daniel 7.13-14, and I have indicated why this seems to me unlikely. I propose, instead, that the expression simply reflected Jesus' sense that he had a particular, even unique, vocation in God's redemptive purposes. That is, I suggest that Jesus saw himself as having a special role and mission, and that he used the expression for 'the son of man' self-referentially to express this conviction. It did not indicate what that mission was, and did not lay claim to any office or previously defined status. Instead, 'the son of man' functioned to express his sense of being chosen for a special purpose before God.

³⁴ As I noted in *Lord Jesus Christ* (305, n. 119), a speech-formula is not the same thing as a 'title', for the latter term typically designates some office or honored status.

³⁵ I refer to my discussion in *Lord Jesus Christ*, 292, where I provide further distinctive features of Jesus' speech-practice ascribed to him in the Gospels. For the notion of 'idiolect', see, e.g., Lyons, *Language and Linguistics*, 26-27.

³⁶ See, e.g., Lyons, *Language and Linguistics*, 22-23; Ruth M. Kempson, *Semantic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 50-74.

I emphasize that this is a historical, and not a confessionally-based, claim.³⁷ To consider that Jesus saw himself as having a unique significance and role does not require that he did or did not see himself in terms of the specific post-Easter claims about him. Nor does it require that one assent to him having any such special significance. Also, it is not so strange an idea as bourgeois moderns might at first think. A sense of being divinely called to a unique mission or role is neither unique in history nor in itself indicative of mental health problems.³⁸ We know of other figures who firmly believed that they were divinely commissioned for a unique role. Paul is perhaps the most obvious example from the NT, in his conviction that he had been destined by God before birth to fulfill his apostolic vocation (esp. Gal. 1.15-16). Although we have no comparable first-hand testimony, we should also presume that John the Baptist saw himself as specially called by God to announce eschatological judgment and salvation to Israel, in the mould of the OT prophets. If we broadened the survey, we could also include figures such as ‘the Teacher of Righteousness’, commonly thought by Qumran scholars to have had a sense of unique calling, and others across the centuries and in various religious traditions.

The specifics of Jesus’ own sense of his vocation need not detain us, and it would require much more space than is available to explore adequately and defend any proposal about what it was. For the purpose of accounting for his use of the expression ‘the son of man’, it is sufficient to posit here that Jesus thought of himself as having a particular, probably even unique, divine vocation and mission, and that this sense of being a particular mortal called to a special role in the coming of the kingdom of God found expression in the use of that distinctive way of referring to himself.

Conclusion

This book does not address all matters concerning ‘the son of man’, and will likely not settle all minds on the issues included for discussion in it. But I believe that it brings together a collection of studies that consolidate and confirm some important points for

³⁷ I plead guilty to the charge of being a Christian (take me to the lions!), but my proposal does not depend upon or in itself promote a Christian stance on Jesus.

³⁸ See, e.g., Rodney Stark, ‘Normal Revelations: A Rational Model of “Mystical” Experiences’, in *Religion and the Social Order: Vol. 1, New Developments in Theory and Research*, ed. David G. Bromley (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1991), 239-51; *idem*, ‘How Sane People Talk to the Gods: A Rational Theory of Revelations’, in *Innovations in Religious Traditions*, ed. Michael A. Williams, Collette Cox and Martin S. Jaffee (Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992), 19-34.

further exploration and debate. Among other points made, several contributions combine to show that Casey's confidently proposed solution to 'the son of man' problem has significant problems itself. The origin of the expression ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου probably does lie in some Aramaic expression. But the Greek phrasing and probably the underlying Aramaic equivalent were both unusual, and were each intended to connote a particularizing sense. The most economical explanation for the restricted pattern of usage of 'the son of man' in the Gospels is that it reflects a reverential attitude toward Jesus' own distinctive use of an Aramaic equivalent, and an effort to convey that use in the Greek rendition of Jesus' sayings. The evidence of choice in the retention and deployment of the expression in the Gospels probably reflects the aim of the authors (and the tradition on which they drew) to give the sayings of Jesus a certain recognizable verisimilitude, using what had become known as a key earmark of Jesus' speech-practice.