THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SON OF MAN TERMINOLOGY IN EZEKIEL

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ABSTRACT: This article addresses the “son of man” from its Old Testament canonical roots, with particular reference to the book of Ezekiel. Ben-adam, the Hebrew for “son of man,” is used both in generic and personal senses. God identifies the prophet as “son of man” because of his submission to the power of the Spirit and consequently being qualified to speak for God, a thing that bespeaks the purpose for which man was created. At times God uses the prophet as object lesson (pedagogy in biography), with pains inflicted on his person to remind Judah that a man can be that obedient, although so spiritual. Due to the fact that “son of man” implies not only the human aspect God’s servant, but as well the divine strength that produces true humanity, readers of this article have been cautioned by H. E. Tohdt not to place the “son of man” of the prophets exactly on par with that of Jesus. 1

KEYWORDS: Son of Man, Ezekiel, Eschatology

PROLEGOMENA

A. The Son of Man in the Old Testament

Besides Psalm 8:4, the terminology “Son of man” is mentioned only in the Old Testament books of the exilic prophets, Daniel and Ezekiel, as bar-nasha (Aramaic) and ben-adam (Hebrew). In Daniel it is found once (Daniel 7:13) and 93 times in Ezekiel. 2

The word ben etymologically means “son of.” Ben-adam is, therefore, a description of generic man, that is, man in the collective sense. Like Adam in Genesis, ben-Adam in Ezekiel is both a generic as well as a specific name or title. 3

The need to identify Ezekiel with the human genre is so high for God that He (God) addresses him (Ezekiel) as “son of man” 93 times. Only on two occasions has God addressed the prophet by his name. That is, the first occasion of the

word of God coming to the prophet (Ezekiel 1:3) and when Ezekiel lost his wife (24:24)\(^4\)

A. **The Son of Man in the Gospels**

An Analysis of available documents reveals that the title of the “son of man” was habitually used in first century Judaism.\(^5\) According to R. Leivestead, the title as applied to Jesus, was merely to show his humanity.\(^6\)

However, a closer look at the Gospels has revealed that Leivestead’s position is shaky or lopsided. For we find in the Gospels that this title bespeaks both human and divine characters of Jesus. In Matthew 9:6, Mark 2:10-11 and Luke 5:24, Jesus the Son of Man in His divine nature has power to forgive sins. In Matthew 12:8, Mark 2:28 and Luke 6:5, He has the power to alter the laws of the Sabbath, because He is the Lord of the Sabbath. In Matthew 16:18; Mark 8:9; Luke 9:28, the Son of Man is the Son of the Living God.

As human, the Son of Man is to suffer and die in order to save humanity (Matthew 16:21, Mark 8:31, Luke 9:22), being their Messiah. This Messiah shall, however, return to the earth as Divine Judge (Matthew 16:28, Mark 9:1, Luke 9:27). Finally, as He was raised from the dead (Matthew 17:9, Mark 9:9, Luke 9:36, so shall all those who believe in Him (1 Corinthians 15:13-23).

**EZEKIEL AS “SON OF MAN”**

Having had a general idea of the terminology based on the Old Testament and the Gospels, we shall now pay a fuller attention to its occurrence in Ezekiel. In Daniel 7:13-14 we have noticed that only the divine aspects of the “Son of Man” are portrayed. In the Gospels both divine and human aspects are featured. The question now is, where does Ezekiel fit in?

The question of honour and dishonour, and exaltation and humiliation, fit into a single personality, would best address the ambiguous picture of the “Son of Man”, both for Ezekiel and Jesus.\(^7\) Based on Ezekiel and Daniel 7:13f, the dual personality of the Son of Man has always been the subject of much discussion and controversy.\(^8\) H. E. Todt has stated that “One of the most important issues which modified the Jewish religion during the pre-Christian

\(^3\) Burnier-Genton, pp.28-29

\(^4\) Ibid., p.29


\(^8\) Ibid., pp.60-63; Martin de Vivié, p.20
and late-Hellenistic periods was the decisive step taken towards a radically transcendent concept of eschatological saviour (who is identified with the “son of man” terminology)."9

A. The Divine aspects of the “Son of Man” in Ezekiel

1. His ability to speak for God

If the “son of man” speaks for God, he is a holy man, with divine powers to receive messages from God. Before he could do this, we see the Spirit of God entering into him (Ezekiel 2:1-2,8) and equipping him with the word of God (Ezekiel 3:1-3,10). It must however be noted that the way we can refer to Ezekiel and other prophets as divine is not on the same category as we would place Jesus.10 While the Spirit of God entered into Ezekiel, Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit of God Himself (Luke 1:35). Also, while Jesus was perfectly divine, Ezekiel experienced divinity only as a communicable attribute.11

In Ezekiel 8, the “son of man” receives divine revelations. He is carried by the Spirit, and in the Spirit, to see the abominable practice of God’s chosen people going on in the temple at Jerusalem (Ezekiel 8:3, 12, 17), where they worship images of abominable beasts, accompanied with the burning of incense. This was practiced even by the seventy elders of Israel, including the supposedly faithful Jaazaniah, whom as from the holy lineage of Shaphan (Ezekiel 8:7-13).12

Further, women were weeping for Tammuz, the Babylonian equivalent of the Summerian god of vegetation known as Damuzi (or Dazu), which means “true son”, “faithful son”, or “proper son”. It is believed that Tammuz was a pre-deluvian Summerian shepherd who married the goddess, Istar. When he died, she followed him into the underworld to secure his release. Consequently, all fertility ceased upon the earth. That is the reason why women had to weep for the restoration of fertility (Ezekiel 8:14-15).13

Yet still there were twenty-five men worshipping the sun (8:15-18). All of these were equivalent to putting the branch to their noses or scorning God.

9 Todt, p.13
10 Ibid., p.22ff
13 Cooper, p.123; Marshal, S.V. “Tammuz”
— which the holy “son of man” could not tolerate.  

2. The Son of Man’s Prophetic Scope in Ezekiel  
Because of the heinous idolatry of Israel, the “son of man” was mandated to prophesy against the rebellious people and their land (Ezekiel 2, 4, 15). He spoke to them, and against them, with divine authority, but his prophetic responsibility extended over and beyond the land of Israel.  

The scope of Ezekiel’s prophetic ministry affirms this son of man’s divine mind, for God is not only God of the Jews but God of the entire universe. To exercise his Sovereignty, God shows concern for Moab, Edom, Philistia (25:1-17), Tyre (26:28, 1-28:19), Egypt (29:32:32). God made sure that He used the “son of man” to deal squarely with those other nations before consummating the fall of Jerusalem.

It has been noticed that Amos used a similar homiletic method, so that by the time he turned against Judah, they would have no gnomption to accuse God of injustice (Amos 1:3-2:3).

The universality of Ezekiel’s prophecies make him a fitting figure to be the “son of man”, which at the same time highlights the impartiality of God. This places his “son-of-man” status on par with that of Jesus, at least, as far as universality is concerned.

In a JETS article by C. Hassel Bullock, Ezekiel is said to be a bridge between the Testaments. This is so because of the relationship he finds between Ezekiel and the Apocalypse of John, and Paul, Matthew, Mark and Luke. Bullock shows how Ezekiel and Jesus are prophets with similar modes of communication, notably, parables. Both have deep knowledge of the Lord as seen in Ezekiel’s recognition formula, “You shall know that I am the Lord,” and Jesus’ “I am” sayings, as in John’s Gospels. Finally, is the common use of their “son of man” terminology.

2. The Son of Man’s Compassion by the Spirit in Ezekiel  
The exercise of compassion has been one of the virtues that characterize the “son of man” in the Gospels. In Matthew 9:36, when He saw the multitude He was moved with compassion because He saw that they were

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weary, and were scattered like sheep without a shepherd. In a similar vein, Ezekiel is associated with divine compassion events such as resuscitated dry bones; we see the possibility of restoration for the house of Israel. This will depend upon repentance, and by the agency of the Spirit and the Word of God.

Consequently, the tide now turns in favour of Israel and against their enemies, after the dumbness of Ezekiel has terminated (33:22). The son of man is now commanded to set his face against Gog and prophesy destruction upon them (38:2, 14).

Furthermore, God's unfailing compassion for His people (Lamentations 3:22, 23) causes the return of His glory to Israel, with full restoration of landed property and temple worship (43:7-18, 47, 48). Rudder Bartelmus has remarked that this does not refer to physical resurrection.19

Daniel Block is not happy the way most theologians refer to the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament only in passing. For this reason he has devoted twenty-three pages in a JETS article to do justice to the place of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament.20 He notices that out of the various verbs used in describing the Spirit, such as "to pant," "breath," "wind," "vapour," "heat," "blood," "life" etc, the Hebrew, ruah or wind, occurs more often in Ezekiel (52 times) than it does in Isaiah (51 times) and in Jeremiah (18 times).21

Having christened Ezekiel, the prophet of the Spirit, he details how wind or the Hebrew ruah is used in Ezekiel as an agent of conveyance, animation, inspiration and how it means "mind" and a sign of divine ownership. There is little wonder, therefore, that the "son of man" must use the Spirit to bring restoration to Israel. The Spirit is the means to bring revival and renewal.22

B. Human aspects of the Son of the Man in Ezekiel

1. Suffering Messiah
In the Gospels and Epistles, the "son of man" terminology is replete with messianic overtones. This Messiah is not only presented in his exalted state, but as a suffering servant of God. Ezekiel is comparable with the suffering and obedient human messiah, both as a person and as a minister of God. The suffering and obedience of the prophet can be seen in the

20 Ibid.
21 Thomas, p.40; Rogers, p. 349.
22 Block, The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1-24, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans
pedagogy in biography\textsuperscript{23} or acted prophecies peculiar to the prophetical books.

It has been debated that the dumbness of chapters 3:25 to 33:21 was not permanent but occasional. In addition to acted prophecies, Ezekiel was to reprove the exiles only when he had messages from God. This lasted until the fall of Jerusalem in 33:22, a period of seven and half years (597-589 BC).\textsuperscript{24}

Block has shown that most have misinterpreted this restrictive measure as a psychological feat or illness. He enlightens that it was neither psychological nor pathological dumbness, because to have one's tongue stick to one's palate (lasondabagel/lehek, Hebrew), does not require an irreversible physiological condition. Rather, like in Job 29:10, it is a voluntary speechlessness.\textsuperscript{25} The overall lesson, however, is that Ezekiel obeyed God's restriction as an obedient servant or "son of man".

Another teaching using the life of the suffering "son of man" is the exilic metaphor of preparing his baggage as if going on exile (Ezekiel 12:3). Jesus, the first missionary sent by the Father left His throne, to the corrupt world to redeem mankind from sin (John 3:16; Romans 5:8). In a similar vein, Ezekiel, the other "son of man" was relocated from Jerusalem where he was supposed to serve as priest for the exiles in Babylon, under the deplorable exilic conditions.

This obedient servant did this without speeches to teach God's lessons to the rebellious house of Israel. He even had to eat his defiled bread with quaking in order to portray to the rebellious people of God that all was not well between them and their God (12:18).

The most excruciating of pedagogies in biography in the life of "son of man" was that of the death of his wife, an incident that had to see no mourning by the prophet (Ezekiel 24:15-18). Lamar Eugene Cooper has, however, objected to the notion that God put Ezekiel's wife to death as an object lesson. Rather, he says that God used the imminent death of the prophet's wife as an occasion to prepare his people for judgement. That is, he reminds them, by the incident, of the inevitable calamity that shall befall Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{26}

Millard C. Lind, upon hooking up the result of the prophet's pathos
with that of Jesus, as the son of man comments:

There is but a step from this prophetic and divine pathos to the divine compassion revealed in the unmarried status, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth; and the divine pathos revealed by those who take up the cross and follow him.27

By this we can see the climax of God’s burden for Jerusalem, which, being the centre of God’s world was important both to Ezekiel and to the Lord Jesus Christ, both of whom were burdened for the Holy City. On one occasion the Lord visualized and prophesied that Jerusalem was like broods of a hen that have refused the protection and warmth of their mother. The result of this was always total deliverance unto their enemies (Matthew 23:37-39; Luke 13:34-35).

2. The Creatureliness of the Son of Man
Creatureliness in this context refers to the fact that the prophet does acknowledge the fact that God is his Creator, while the prophet must limit his freedom within the human domain. The most outstanding trait of the son of man that outlays his creatureliness is his dependence upon the transcendent God. The son of man was always dependent upon God’s direction. Whether this meant going to Babylon, or serving among the captives by the river Kebar, or eating God’s scroll, or being carried by the Spirit to Jerusalem, or serving as a watchman over a stubborn house of Israel, or receiving visions of God for direction, the son of man was ready to comply to the leading and mandates of the Transcendent. Norman Geisler and Winfried Corduan confirm:

By this commitment to the Transcendent, a person is able to transcend himself. And since he has a fundamental desire to transcend, the religious experience of self-transcendence is germane to his very existence as a human.28

The Lord did transcend unto the Father by praying to Him, and depending on His will (Matthew 26:24, 39, 42, 45, 53-56). The ability and readiness to pray to the Transcendent and be willing to submit to His will is the true essence of humanity. The fall in Genesis 3 came as a result of the creature (man) looking away from His creator (God), and looking

28 Bullock, JETS 25/1 (March 1982) 29-31; Vawter-Hoppe, p25
unto a fellow creature, the serpent. We must be ready to pray and wait upon Him, for even Jesus went back to heaven with this praying and dependence ability, insofar as He is now in heaven with the ability to pray, intercede for the saints (Romans 8:34). Invariably Jesus He is now in heaven with his humanity.

2. The Priestly Duties of the Son of Man in Ezekiel
Bullock has shown how both Jesus and Ezekiel have the priestly calling because both were speaking to God on behalf of his people. Ezekiel was initially trained to be a priest, but God only altered his ministry to that of a prophet in Babylon. Nevertheless, the priestly spirit was still there in Ezekiel, just as it was in Jesus.

In terms of priesthood, we can see that both Ezekiel and Jesus had the zeal for a purified temple (Ezekiel 8:1-8; John 2:13-22). They realized that the temple was their Father’s house, and ought not to have been defiled by vain worshippers. So they wished for the sanctity of God’s temple to be restored (Ezekiel 37:26, 40-48; John 2:13-22).

Both priests had the welfare of their people in mind. They were interested in the continuation of life for the people. That is why they emphasized the resurrection. Jesus emphasized the resurrection, but Ezekiel resuscitation. Bullock has realized that according to the Babylonian Talmud, Jews used to consider Ezekiel 37 to affirm the hope for physical resurrection, even though the prophet was actually referring to the people’s restoration to righteousness. He uses the word resuscitation in referring to the event of Ezekiel 37, and states:

If the resurrection of Israel in Ezekiel 37, and the inaugural sign of the eschatological era are described in chapters 40-48, then Jesus’ restoration of the temple (his bodily resurrection) was the countersign of the beginning of that era that the prophet Ezekiel foresaw.29

The resurrection and the coming of the new age point to a previous state of suffering and death. Both Ezekiel and Jesus passed through traumatic periods in their earthly ministries for the sake of the people they were serving. This was to characterize their priestly spirit (e.g. Hebrews 2:14-16). For Jesus, the suffering was vicarious to the extent that He became the Sacrificial Lamb in the atonement. For Ezekiel, the suffering was such that drew him, body and soul, into his experience which prefigured the Atonement of Christ.30

29 Bullock, JETS 25/1 (March 1982) 29-31
CONCLUSION

What the title "son of man" means in Ezekiel is that he was holy enough to see visions of God, and be found worthy of standing in the gap between God and Israel, the purpose of which was to warn them of impending danger to the intent that they might return to God.

On the other hand, he was human enough, through his revealed restrictions and privations, to feel for the calamity that was to befall them: the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. No wonder, God being the discerner of all hearts, warned Ezekiel not to weep when this would happen.

By the power of the Spirit, he was able to speak for God and by the same power of the Spirit, he was able to bear the priestly pains of suffering for his people.

The problem with most of the 21st century church is the overly use of political power and relegation to the background of the power of the Spirit. When the flesh is put under subjection (I Corinthians 9:27; Galatians 5:16-17) and the Church is led by the Spirit (Romans 8:14) then shall we realise the full control of the Spirit of the Son of Man (son of man) over the lives of the believers.

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