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DID JESUS CALL HIMSELF THE SON OF MAN?

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The Synoptic Gospels represent Jesus as calling himself the "Son of Man." The contention of this article is that Jesus did not use this self-designation.

1. The Synoptic Gospels represent Jesus as attempting to avoid being known as "the Messiah." This conflicts with his use of a title which carried an unmistakable messianic meaning.

2. In certain instances the phrase belongs to an editorial observation which has become a part of Jesus' conversation.

3. Sometimes the phrase is inserted by Matthew or Luke into a passage from Mark which is without it. Occasionally these insertions alter or spoil the original meaning of the passage.

4. In many passages common to Matthew and Luke and not found in Mark, one of the later evangelists lacks the phrase where the other has it.

5. In other instances where the phrase is common to Matthew and Luke, the passage bears evidence of later working over. In other passages the phrase is textually suspicious.

If Jesus did not call himself the Son of Man, did he entertain the idea of his messiahship and of his parousia which the church attributed to him?

Throughout the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus is represented as calling himself the "Son of Man." It has been generally agreed that this representation is correct. It is the contention of this paper that this consensus of opinion is erroneous, and that there is every reason to think that Jesus did not use this self-designation.

Whatever the phrase "Son of Man" may have meant in its Aramaic original, there is no doubt that to the writers of the gospels it was a designation for the Messiah. But even to those who think of Jesus as always conscious of his messiahship, his use of this title is still full of difficulties.

The most general of these difficulties is, that the Synoptic Gospels represent Jesus as making a constant effort to avoid being known as the Messiah. "He suffered not the demons to speak, because they knew him," says Mark.¹ Luke fills the sentence out by adding, "to be the Messiah."² Even after the confession of Peter at Caesarea, when Jesus had acknowl-

¹ Mark 1:34.

² Luke 4:41.

edged his messiahship in the intimate circle of his disciples, he still forbade them to tell anyone that he was the Christ. But if Jesus thus refused to allow himself to be known as the Messiah, how could he, habitually and in passages long anterior to those just referred to, have referred to himself by a title which would have betrayed his messiahship to the crowd? Indeed, why should Jesus have referred to himself in the third person, under this or any other title? Why should he not always have said "I," as other men do, and as he himself did in many of his most emphatic passages?

Particular instances of Jesus' reported use of this title support the suspicion aroused by this general consideration. One of the most obvious of these instances is found in the story of the paralytic borne by his four friends.¹ The account runs: "In order that ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins, he saith to the sick of the palsy, I say unto thee, Arise." No one can have read this sentence without feeling its illogical construction. To be logically constructed it should read, either, "In order that ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins, I will now say to the sick of the palsy, Arise"; or "In order that they might know that the Son of Man had power on earth to forgive sins, He said to the sick of the palsy, Arise." The first of these two orders would make the speech throughout a speech of Jesus. The second would make it throughout a part of the narrative. In the sentence as it actually runs, the point of view is partly that of the speaker, Jesus, and partly that of the narrator, Mark. But if the clause which contains the title "Son of Man" be taken, not as part of the speech of Jesus, but as part of Mark's own narration, the confusion in the persons of the verbs disappears and the whole statement is quite natural. In other words, in this instance the phrase "Son of Man" seems naturally to go back to Mark and not to Jesus.

¹ Mark 2:10; Matt. 9:6; Luke 5:24.

There is a somewhat similar instance in which the words "the Son of Man" occur in what seems like an editorial addition; the phrase is found in all three synoptics, Matthew and Luke evidently taking it and its entire context from Mark.¹ The phrase occurs at the end of the discussion concerning Jesus' walking through the corn on the Sabbath: "Therefore the Son of Man is lord also of the Sabbath." This closing sentence fits the argument about the Sabbath so poorly that Schmidt, in his *Prophet of Nazareth*, has argued from it that the phrase "Son of Man" did not refer to Jesus, nor to any other individual, but to man generally. If "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath," the appropriate conclusion is that man, as such, is lord of the Sabbath, and not, as Mark has it, "the Son of Man." If however the argument of Jesus be allowed to conclude with Mark's verse 27, and his verse 28 be regarded as an addition by Mark himself, Jesus is relieved of this illogical conclusion. The verse will then have come from a time when the proper observance of the Sabbath was not quite settled among the Christians, and when the example of Jesus was adduced, as it probably often was, in support of a certain freedom of observance.

In an instance peculiar to Luke the same phrase would seem with equal clearness to be part of an editorial comment, though appearing upon the surface as part of a saying of Jesus. It is that of the parable of the Unjust Judge.² The obvious purpose of the parable is to exhort men to patience and to a continued belief in God's justice. The parable closes with the question, "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man cometh, shall he find the faith in the earth?" Noting the article before the word "faith," one asks, "What faith"? And answers, naturally, the faith which Jesus had taught, the faith of the Christian church. But who was in doubt about the continuance of that faith? Not Jesus, certainly. Who then? Luke himself. In the mouth of Jesus, spoken at a time when

¹ Mark 2:28; Matt. 12:8; Luke 6:5.

² Luke 18:8.

he was not "coming," but was actually there, the words add nothing to the parable, and are quite out of place. But in the mouth of Luke, written during a period of persecution and uncertainty, they bear pathetic witness to the difficulty of maintaining the new faith in view of the long delay of the parousia.

An equally clear instance of the misplacing of our phrase is found in Matthew's form of the question addressed by Jesus to his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of Man is?"¹ Matthew and Luke take the entire passage from Mark. Luke, like Mark, makes Jesus ask, quite naturally, "Who do men say that I am?" Matthew's insertion of the phrase "Son of Man" spoils the question by making it carry its own answer. Considering the fact that when Matthew goes on to make Jesus direct his question to his disciples, it reads, not "Who do ye say that the Son of Man is?" but "Who do ye say that I am?" one may conclude without much hesitation that the phrase in the earlier question is a gloss upon the original gospel of Matthew.

Equally plain is the case of the incident recorded by Luke² of the reception of Jesus in the Samaritan village, closing with the words, "For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives (souls) but to save them." As in so many instances where this phrase is used, the tense of the verb is aorist. It is not, "the Son of Man has come," or "is come," but "came"; thus seeming to betray the point of view of one who looks back upon the life of Jesus and sums up its significance in a single statement. That in this instance the words are an editorial addition, and not a part of the speech of Jesus, is clearly confirmed by the fact that they are lacking in the best manuscripts and are omitted by Westcott and Hort. The same may be said of Luke's words³ appended to the conversation between Jesus and Zaccheus. Though in this instance no manuscript authority exists for the rejection of

¹ Matt. 16:13.

² 9:51-56.

³ 19:10.

the words, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost," they obviously constitute an editorial addition to the actual speech of Jesus, explaining why he spoke so graciously, and indicating the developed conception of his work which prevailed in the church at the time of the writing of Luke's gospel.

A similar instance is that of Jesus' discourse on true greatness.¹ "Whoever would be great among you," says Jesus, "let him be your servant." Matthew follows Mark in the additional words, "For even the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." The words are well attested. In Luke's rendering of the same speech,² however, which has evidently been somewhat worked over by Luke or has been influenced in his account by other sources than Mark, the words are lacking. In Matthew, also, the words are followed, in various manuscripts, by a considerable addition in the same vein. Quite without the suggestion contained in these facts, one can but consider this sentence of Mark's (and Matthew's), with others of the same kind already considered, as an editorial comment of the gospel writers, intended by them to enforce Jesus' advice by his own example both in life and death. The perfectly definite reference to the death of Jesus, and the developing conception of what that death meant to the world, would almost of themselves stamp the words as an utterance of the growing faith of the church, and not as an utterance of Jesus himself.

We may advance the matter a step further by observing somewhat more in detail some of the passages where the phrase "the Son of Man" is inserted in one gospel where the parallel passage in one or both of the other gospels is without it. Thus in the passage which Matthew takes from Mark,³ he inserts (vs. 28) the phrase "the Son of Man coming in his

¹ Mark 10:45; Matt. 20:28.

² Luke 22:24-27.

³ Matt. 16:24-28; Mark 8:34-9:1; Luke 9:23-27.

kingdom." Bousset has called attention to the fact that in this instance, and in several others peculiar to Matthew, the conception of a kingdom of Christ seems to have taken the place of the Kingdom of God about which Jesus preached. Any such substitution of one conception for the other must of course be much later than the time of Jesus. That such a substitution has taken place in this instance is confirmed by the fact that Mark and Luke not only lack the phrase "the Son of Man," but instead of "in his (Christ's) kingdom" read simply and naturally, "the Kingdom of God."

Matthew has a similar insertion of our phrase in his sentence,¹ "When the Son of Man sits upon the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones judging the tribes of Israel." The body of this section appears to be taken from Mark,² but to have been influenced in both Matthew and Luke by a non-Markan source common to them. The part of the discourse containing our phrase is apparently taken by both Matthew and Luke, not from Mark but from this other source. But though Luke has thus derived his statement "Ye shall sit on twelve thrones judging the tribes of Israel" from the same source as Matthew, Luke's version of it does not contain the phrase "the Son of Man." Matthew has added it. The source of Matthew and Luke is here obviously an old one, probably older than Mark, going back to a time of predominantly Jewish Christianity; but the phrase added by Matthew does not appear to have been contained in it. Matthew's habit of heightening the eschatological character of various passages is further illustrated by the fact that elsewhere in this same section he reads "the Son of Man upon the throne of his glory," where Luke reads merely "my kingdom." Here again, of course, in both gospels, occurs the substitution of the kingdom of Christ for the Kingdom of God.

In Matthew's twenty-fourth chapter³ occur two instances of our phrase peculiar to him, though he is here depending

¹ Matt. 19:28.

² Mark 10:28 f.

³ Vss. 30 and 39.

upon Mark. "The little apocalypse," to which the passage belongs, is now generally considered to be a Jewish document worked over, or worked into the speech of Jesus, by the evangelists or by a tradition anterior to them. In the first instance just referred to, Matthew has the words, "And then shall be seen the sign of the Son of Man in heaven"; they are lacking in both Mark and Luke. In the second instance, the passage concerning "the days of Noah," Matthew and Luke (Mark has here no parallel) once use our phrase in common;¹ but Matthew adds it a second time² where it is lacking in Luke. That the words are to be credited to Matthew (or his source?) instead of to Jesus, is further indicated by the fact that here, as in other instances where the phrase is peculiar to him, he has coupled them with the word "parousia," a usage peculiar to Matthew.

While Matthew contains a larger number of the insertions of our phrase where Luke or Mark (or both) in parallel passages are without it, Luke is to be credited with a few such insertions. In his beatitude³ "Blessed are ye when men shall hate you . . . on account of the Son of Man," Matthew's somewhat close parallel to this beatitude is without this phrase. This is one of the few passages where the phrase is not used in an eschatological sense. But Luke's language here, implying that the Christians are or have been persecuted for their messianic expectations concerning Jesus, certainly betrays a time much later than that of Jesus himself. The passage⁴ "Whosoever shall confess me before men, him will the Son of Man confess before the angels of God" is obviously eschatological. It contains the same confusion of first and third persons which has been noted in other instances. In his parallel verse Matthew says simply, "Him will I confess."⁵ In most instances, therefore, it is Matthew, but in a few

¹ Matt. 24:37; Luke 17:26. ² Vs. 39. ³ 6:22. ⁴ Luke 12:8.

⁵ Other instances of Luke's peculiar use of our phrase have been discussed above, but they occur in passages not duplicated in the other gospels.

instances it is Luke, who represents Jesus as referring to himself as "the Son of Man" where in the other gospel he says simply "I," "me," or "mine."

In one or two instances Matthew and Luke agree in the use of our phrase where they are dependent upon Mark but where Mark does not use it. Most notable of these is the passage concerning "the sin against the Holy Ghost." I suppose that any reference to "the Holy Ghost" in the mouth of Jesus is liable to suspicion on general grounds; since the Fourth Gospel undoubtedly represents the early tradition that "the Holy Ghost was not given" till after the death of Jesus. In this case, however, we are not left to such general considerations. Matthew and Luke agree in making Jesus say,¹ "Whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him." They thus contrast those who speak against Jesus, with those who speak against the Holy Ghost; the former may be forgiven, the latter not. Mark,² from whom the passage is taken, does not contain this contrast, as he does not contain our phrase. He does, however, have the phrase "the sons of men." If Mark had before him the same source from which Matthew and Luke derived their phrase "the Son of Man," it is hard to say why he should have replaced this phrase, with its direct and unmistakable reference to Jesus, by his more general and colorless phrase. But the entire passage, either as recorded in Mark or in some earlier source or as worked over by Matthew and Luke, obviously comes from a period of the developing life of the church when the members of the church were recipients of the Spirit and those outside were not. Blasphemy against the Holy Ghost was then much worse than blasphemy against the Son of Man, because one might speak ill of Jesus without knowing or understanding him, but one who spoke ill of the Holy Spirit struck at the very life of the church, and reviled the gift by which all Christians lived. The pas-

¹ Matt. 12:32; Luke 12:10.

² 3:28-29.

sage reminds one of Paul's statement, "I give you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit calleth Jesus accursed," and was probably written, or assumed its present form, somewhere near the time these words of Paul were written.

There remain certain instances where the phrase "the Son of Man" is used by both Matthew and Luke, in parallel passages not derived from Mark. Such is the passage in which Jesus compares himself to Jonah and Solomon.¹ Luke says simply that as Jonah was a sign to his generation, so the Son of Man shall be to his. The meaning seems eschatological. Matthew however changes the meaning by introducing the extremely definite prediction about the "three days and nights in the heart of the earth." The definiteness of this prediction, so different from anything else reputed to have been said by Jesus, has of itself led many to suspect that the exact wording of Matthew's passage took shape after the resurrection. This explanation would certainly relieve Jesus of the responsibility of comparing himself so freely with Solomon, and claiming such superiority to him—a thing eminently proper for the early church to do, but somewhat strange as coming from Jesus himself.

A similar passage, open to a similar objection, is that in which Jesus compares his parousia to the lightning.² Of this comparison, Bousset³ remarks that it can be attributed to Jesus only upon the supposition that he had "completely mythologized his own person." Of the passage, "Ye know not in what hour the Son of Man cometh,"⁴ it need only be remarked how ill the words fit the time of Jesus himself, and how well they fit the period in which the gospels were written, when men were looking with eager expectancy for the parousia. The same thing is true of the statement, "Ye shall not finish the cities of Israel before the Son of Man be come."⁵ If as has been suggested by Mr. James Hardy Ropes (if I remember

¹ Matt. 12:40; Luke 11:30.

³ *Kyrios Christos*, pp. 11-12.

² Matt. 24:27; Luke 17:24.

⁴ Matt. 24:44; Luke 12:40.

⁵ Matt. 10:23.

correctly), the section in which this saying occurs was first compiled as a book of instructions to the early Christian preachers, the words fall beautifully into place; the preachers are to make haste, as their task can hardly be completed, at best, before the parousia. In the mouth of Jesus, alive and well and with no immediate prospect of death before him, they are strangely out of place.

It would be too tedious to ask the reader to examine every passage in which our Synoptic Gospels use the phrase "the Son of Man." By far the larger part of them have now been gone over. To the writer's mind, not one of them is unsuspect. In many instances the phrase is obviously inserted by one writer into a context where one or both of the other gospels are without it. In others, it is textually suspicious. In others it is obviously an editorial remark which the author never intended to be taken as part of the speech of Jesus. In others its introduction produces confusion in the persons of the verbs and in the structure of the sentence. In others it betrays a point of view obviously unlike that of Jesus and impossible in his time. It abounds in passages which speak of the death and resurrection and "parousia" of Jesus in precisely such terms as he would not have been likely to use but as were entirely natural for his followers to employ after his death and while awaiting his parousia.

If Jesus did not call himself the Son of Man, the question naturally arises, at what period the phrase began to be applied to him. Light is thrown upon this question by the fact that the phrase is never employed by Paul. It is found once in the book of Acts, in the mouth of Stephen; but the speech of Stephen is probably much later than Stephen himself. It occurs in the common non-Markan document that lies behind Matthew and Luke; whatever that document be called, its most probable date is a few years later than the Pauline epistles. The title is used oftener by Mark than by this earlier source, and oftener by Matthew and Luke than by

Mark—an indication that it only gradually acquired its place as a recognized messianic title of Jesus.

If Jesus did not call himself the Son of Man, the further question remains whether, and how far, he thought of himself, in any way, at any time, as the Messiah; or whether, if he did, he connected with that idea those images of a return upon the clouds and a messianic throne and kingdom which the early church reports him as having entertained. The present study is of course not conclusive upon such a point. But many or most of those messianic conceptions which are most materialistic and most obnoxious to modern minds, find their expression in precisely those passages where the phrase "the Son of Man" is most freely used. The present study does certainly throw doubt upon the authenticity of these passages as coming from Jesus, and therefore relieves him of the responsibility for the grosser elements of the messianic conception.