

The Origin of Paul's Religion

The Jewish Environment (Part 4)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

The title "Son of Man," which is used frequently in the Similitudes, has given rise to a great deal of discussion, especially because of its employment in the Gospels as a self-designation of Jesus. It has been maintained by some scholars that "Son of Man" never could have been a Messianic title, since the phrase in Aramaic idiom means simply "man." Thus the Greek phrase, "the Son of Man," in the Gospels would merely be an over-literal translation of an Aramaic phrase which meant simply "the man," and the use of "Son of Man" as a title would not extend back of the time when the tradition about the words of Jesus passed over into Greek. But in recent years this extreme position has for the most part been abandoned. In the first place, it is by no means clear that the Aramaic phrase from which the phrase "the Son of Man" in the Gospels is derived was simply the ordinary phrase meaning simply "the man." Opposed to this view is to be put, for example, the weighty opinion of Dalman.¹ In the second place, it has been shown that the linguistic question is not so important as was formerly supposed. For even if "the son of man" in Aramaic meant simply "the man," it might still be a title. The commonest noun may sometimes become a title, and a title of highly specialized significance. For example, the word "day" is a very common word, but "The Day" in certain connections, like the German, "Der Tag," altogether without the help of any adjectives, comes to designate one particular day. So "the Man" or "that Man" could become a very lofty title, especially if it refers to some definite scene in which He who is the "Man" par excellence is described.

In the Similitudes, such is actually the case; the phrase "Son of Man," whatever be its exact meaning, plainly refers to the "one like unto a son of man" who in Daniel vii. 13 appears in the presence of "the Ancient of Days." This reference is made perfectly plain at the first mention of the Son of Man (1 Enoch xlii. 1, 2), where the same scene is evidently described as the scene of Dan. vii. 13. The "Son of Man" is not introduced abruptly, but is first described as a "being whose countenance had the appearance of a man," and is then referred to in the Similitudes not only as "the Son of Man," but also as "that Son of Man." Charles and others suppose, indeed, that the Ethiopic word translated "that" is merely a somewhat false representation, in the Ethiopic translation, of the Greek definite article, so that the Greek form of the book from which the extant Ethiopic was taken had everywhere "the Son of Man," and nowhere "that Son of Man." The

¹ Dalman, *Die Worte Jesu*, i, 1898, pp. 191-197 (English Translation, *The Words of Jesus*, i, 1909, pp. 234-241); Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 1913, pp. 13, 14.

question is perhaps not of very great importance. In any case, the phrase "son of man" derives its special significance from the reference to the scene of Dan. vii. 13. Not any ordinary "man" or "son of man" is meant, but the mysterious figure who came with the clouds of heaven and was brought near to the Ancient of Days.

The Son of Man, or the Elect One, in the Similitudes, appears clothed with the loftiest attributes. He existed before the creation of the world (lvin, 3, 6). When he finally appears, it is to sit in glory upon the throne of God (li. 3, etc.), and judge not only the inhabitants of earth but also the fallen angels (lv. 4). For the purposes of judgment he is endued with righteousness and wisdom. He is concerned, more-over, not only with the judgment but also with the execution of the judgment; he causes "the sinners to pass away and be destroyed from off the face of the earth" (lxix. 27). For the righteous, on the other hand, the judgment results in blessing and in communion with the Son of Man. "And the righteous and elect shall be saved in that day, and they shall never thenceforward see the face of the sinners and the unrighteous. And the Lord of Spirits will abide over them, and with that Son of Man shall they eat and lie down and rise up for ever and ever" (lxii. 13, 14).

The entire representation in the Similitudes is supernatural; the Son of Man is a heavenly figure who appears suddenly in the full blaze of his glory. Yet the connection with earth is not altogether broken off. It is upon a glorified earth that the righteous are to dwell. Indeed, despite the cosmic extent of the drama, the prerogatives of Israel are preserved; the Gentile rulers are no doubt referred to in "the Kings and the Mighty" who are to suffer punishment because of their former oppression of "the elect." On the other hand, mere connection with Israel is not the only ground for a man's acceptance by the Son of Man; the judgment will be based upon a real understanding of the secrets of individual lives.

In 4 Ezra vii. 26-31, the rule of the Messiah is represented as distinctly temporary. The Messiah will rejoice the living for four hundred years; then, together with all human beings, he will die; then after the world has returned to primeval silence for seven days, the new age, with the final resurrection, will be ushered in. It may be doubted whether this representation harmonizes with what is said elsewhere in 4 Ezra about the Messiah, indeed whether even in this passage the representation is thoroughly consistent. Box, for example, thinks that there are contradictions here, which are to be explained by the composite nature of the book and by the work of a redactor. But at any rate the result, in the completed book, is clear. The Messiah is to die, like all the men who are upon the earth, and is not connected with the new age. This death of the Messiah is as far as possible from possessing any significance for the salvation of men. Certainly it is not brought into any connection with the problem of sin, which, as has been observed above, engages the special attention of the writer of 4 Ezra. "It is important to observe how the Jewish faith knew of a Saviour for external ills,

but not for sin and condemnation; and how the Christ is able only to create a brief earthly joy, which passes away with the destruction of the world."²

In the "Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs,"³ although Brückner is no doubt right in saying that the Messiah here as well as in 1 Enoch is a supernatural figure, the connection of the Messiah with the tribe of Levi introduces the reader into a somewhat different circle of ideas. The difference becomes more marked in the "Psalms of Solomon,"⁴ where the Messiah is a king of David's line. It is no doubt true that even here the Messiah is no ordinary human being; he destroys his enemies, not by the weapons of warfare and not by the help of Israelitish armies, but by the breath of his mouth. Yet the local, earthly character of the Messiah's reign—what may even be called, perhaps, its political character—is more clearly marked than in the apocalypses. Also there is stronger emphasis upon the ethical qualities of the Messianic king; the righteousness of his people is celebrated in lofty terms, which, however, do not exclude a strong element of Jewish and Pharisaic particularism.

No complete exposition of the Jewish belief about the Messiah has here been attempted. But enough has perhaps been said to indicate at least some features of the Messianic expectation in the period just preceding the time of Paul. Evidently, in certain circles at least, the Messianic hope was transcendent, individualistic, and universalistic. The scene of Messiah's kingdom was not always thought of merely as the earthly Jerusalem; at least the drama by which that kingdom is ushered in was thought of as taking place either in heaven or upon an earth which has been totally transformed. With this transcendent representation went naturally a tendency towards individualism. Not merely nations were to be judged, but also the secrets of the individual life; and individuals were to have a part in the final blessing or the final woe. Of course for those who should die before the end of the age this participation in the final blessedness or the final woe would be possible only by a resurrection. And the doctrine of resurrection, especially for the righteous, is in the apocalypses clearly marked. In 2 Baruch, indeed, there is an interesting discussion of the relation between the resurrection state and the present condition of man; the righteous will first rise in their old bodies, but afterwards will be transformed (2 Baruch xlix-li). Finally, the apocalypses exhibit a tendency toward universalism. The coming of the Messianic kingdom is regarded as an event of cosmic significance. The Gentiles are even sometimes said to share in the blessing. But they are to share in the blessing only by subordination to the people of God.

Despite the importance of the late period, it is interesting to observe that all the essential features of later Jewish eschatology have their roots in the canonical

² Volz, *Judische Eschatologie* von Daniel bis Akiba, 1903, pp. 202f.

³ See Charles, *op. cit.*, ii, pp. 282-367; Schürer, *op. cit.*, iii, pp. 339-356 (English Translation, Division II, vol. iii, pp. 114-124).

⁴ See Gray, in Charles, *op. cit.*, ii, pp. 625-652; Schürer, *op. cit.*, iii, pp. 205-212 (English Translation, Division II, vol. iii, pp. 17-23).

books of the Old Testament. In the first place, the transcendence of the later representation has an old Testament basis. In Isaiah ix and xi the Messiah appears clearly as a supernatural figure, and in Isaiah lxxv. 17 there is a prophecy of new heavens and a new earth. The heavenly "Son of Man" is derived from Dan. vii. 13, and the individualistic interpretation of that passage, which makes the Son of Man, despite verse 18, something more than a mere collective symbol for the people of Israel, is to-day in certain quarters coming to its rights. Not only in the Psalms of Solomon, but also in the apocalypses, the Old Testament language is used again and again to describe the heavenly Messiah. There is, in the second place, an Old Testament basis for the individualism of the later representation. The doctrine of resurrection, with its consequences for an individualistic hope, appears in Daniel. And, finally, the universalism of the apocalypses does not transcend that of the great Old Testament prophets. In the prophets also, the nations are to come under the judgment of God and are to share in some sort in the blessings of Israel.

If, therefore, the apostle Paul before his conversion believed in a heavenly Messiah, supernatural in origin and in function, he was not really unfaithful to the Old Testament.

But was his pre-Christian notion of the Messiah really the source of the Christology of the Epistles? Such is the contention of Wrede and Brückner. Wrede and Brückner believe that the lofty Christology of Paul, inexplicable if it was derived from the man Jesus, may be accounted for if it was merely the pre-Christian conception of the Messiah brought into loose connection with the prophet of Nazareth. This hypothesis must now be examined.

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