

14 The Son of Man

12: 1 - 12

Jesus knew that the argument would not always be verbal, not for him, and not for his followers. Too much was at stake. Here was an established network in which wealth and status combined with moral superiority to identify society's leaders, and Jesus was challenging it with views of society, leadership and morality that shattered their pretensions. When you challenge the structure of society like that, society will hit back.

The movement was taking off. People were now flocking to him in their thousands and it underscored for him the need to make sure his disciples were fully prepared. It was they who would have to lead and teach as more and more people came to them, and their leadership would have to be one of complete honesty. They must not become like the Pharisees – and they could do so.¹ There must be no hypocrisy or double standards: a virtuous public message that can be shelved in private; power-schemes cooked up by the chosen insiders, then given a more respectable spin for public consumption. Their leadership must be utterly transparent: they would not be allowed the protection of “state secrets” or the smoke-filled anonymity of the political back room. They are the servants of God, who brings hidden things to light. What they whisper in the ear, confidentially, will be proclaimed from the rooftops.

They are not to be afraid of society – not even of those who might kill them. For there are those who will have the power to kill them, but that is all. They should keep their fear for One, who after he has killed, has the power to cast into hell. (We should remember that neither Luke, nor any of the documents he draws on, including the whole of the Old Testament, nor Jesus, in any of his reported teaching, gives us a picture of hell other than that of damnation – utter rejection by God, to the very destruction of our being, which is something far worse than death.)

There is such a thing as healthy fear. To be afraid of swimming in shark-infested waters, or of driving in a car with unreliable brakes, is a very sensible and appropriate fear. There is also a “fear” of what is strong and good beyond all our virtues and comprehension, a sense of awe and our own unfitness in the presence of what is holy, because here is a splendor of integrity beyond anything we can understand, let alone keep comfortable

¹ cf Mark 8: 14 – 15, Jesus Messiah ch. 6

company with. Such is the fear of God, and with that fear there goes a deep desire not to be rejected by God, because we recognize the love and the mercy of God, and that God's rejection would be our exclusion from the very universe of goodness.

But that kind of fear is a healthy fear. It is not to be the cringing fear of a powerful and unpredictable God. God has in his care even the two-a-penny sparrows, for he knows and remembers each one of them. Jesus tells his disciples to have confidence, trusting in God, because they are worth more than any number of sparrows. That healthy awe and deep respect described as the "fear of God" does not prevent a humble but confident trust.

For all their meticulous attention to the Law, the Pharisees have neither that healthy fear of God nor humble trust in his mercy. They are so confident they know how to fulfil the Law that they do not think they have anything really to fear from God. He surely approves their actions, since these are the careful observance of every detail of his instructions, but in their obsession with such details they forget all about justice and the love of God, those mighty themes of the prophets from Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Hosea and others after them. These are a closed book to the Pharisees, for whom integrity is no more than success in carrying out the last detail of the written Law and its associated traditions. They have no understanding of the Spirit that spoke in the prophets, or of God's integrity that seeks a whole and healthy society through openness, justice and generosity.

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In all of the gospels, we are told that Jesus referred to "The Son of Man", and frequently to himself as the "son of man". It is a bit of a puzzle, because the earliest Christians, and the Church since, has not picked up on this title. Nor do we find it used by others to refer to Jesus or in any other way. It is only in the gospels, when they report what Jesus himself said.

We have to conclude that, for Jesus, the title was significant, and that the witnesses quoted in the gospels remembered how he used it, although its meaning was later absorbed into other titles that carried more resonance for the first generations of Christians. They recognised him as the Messiah, or Christ, the Son of God, the King, the Lord, the Savior, even as God. But whatever they made of these insights, these descriptions of Jesus, some of them remembered that he himself had spoken of the "Son of Man".

It was a reference at various levels, and comes as an expression from the prophet Ezekiel, the psalms and the Book of Daniel. Ezekiel tells how, in his

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mity vision of God on the bank of the river Chebar, he heard Yahweh address him: “Son of man, stand up. I am going to speak to you.” From then on, whenever God addresses the prophet, he calls him “son of man”. Far more than any other prophet, Ezekiel tells of God speaking to him and so the phrase “son of man” echoes like a solemn and unforgettable catchphrase thru most of his book.

The effect, I find, is to emphasise the littleness of the prophet, his lowliness before the splendid and awesome reality that is Yahweh, God. And yet he is the prophet of Yahweh. It is his mortal voice that will speak the word of Yahweh and address Israel to condemn or to encourage with God’s authority. The son of man is the one who speaks for God.

In psalm 144 the “son of man” is simply humanity before God:

O Lord, what is man that you care for him,
the son of man that you think of him?
Man is like a breath;
his days are like a fleeting shadow. (Psalm 144: 3-4 NIV Bible)

while in psalm 8 the littleness of the son of man is followed by an affirmation of his real glory, which lies in what God has done for him:

What is man that you are mindful of him,
the son of man that you care for him?
You have made him little less than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor. (Psalm 8: 4 – 5 NIV)

and psalm 80 speaks of authority given by God:

Let your hand rest upon the man at your right hand,
the son of man you have raised up for your work. (Psalm 80: 17)

When the book of Daniel took up the phrase, it would seem that it was already in use, from the prophet Ezekiel onwards, as a term for the human being in the face of God Almighty, a lowly, mortal creature in the context of God’s vast reality, yet addressed by God, endowed and given authority from Yahweh, the God of Israel and the God of all creation.

The Book of Daniel, written for the Jews who suffered atrocious persecution under Greek rulers some time after the conquests of Alexander the Great, tells of a dream that Daniel had, in which he saw four terrible beasts, symbols of the great empires that had dominated Israel’s world up to that time. That succession of powers had led to the reign of Antiochus

Epiphanes, a boastful and blasphemous ruler who had sought to destroy the Jewish religion.

Now much nonsense is said and written about the visions of Daniel, especially the vision of the four beasts, mostly by people who want to fix it to their own day and mark that as the end of the world. But Daniel's vision applied to the time of its publishing, when it was given to the people in the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes. Like all prophecy, its first relevance is for its own time, and only because it rightly interprets its own time does it have relevance for later times. Daniel saw the downfall of Antiochus Epiphanes and the victory of the Jewish people, which was accomplished under the sons of the Priest Mattathias, the famous Judas Maccabeus and his brothers.² (And indeed the current prestige and leadership of the Jerusalem priesthood probably owed much to those days of victory.) The Book of Daniel rightly sees in this victory the universal victory of God, who, whatever the appearances to the contrary, does judge and overrule the empires.

The judgement of God upon the empires, and upon the cruel Antiochus Epiphanes, is in the matter of international politics and power. It cannot be reduced to purely religious issues, nor can the vision of Daniel, who next takes up the expression "son of man", be reduced to a purely spiritual one. It speaks of salvation by the intervention of God in this cruel and disorderly world. The world cannot escape its judgement on the plea that it consists of secular institutions outside the sphere of religion. The empires of history stand under that judgment, the British Empire, the Soviet, the Chinese and the great empire that marches to the orders of the Commander-in-Chief in Washington.

Daniel in his vision saw the victory of God in the defeat of Antiochus, the boastful horn in the head of the fourth and most terrible beast.

Thrones were set in place
and the Ancient of Days³ took his seat.
His robe was white as snow,
the hair of his head as pure as wool.
His throne was a blaze of flames.
Its wheels were a burning fire.
A thousand thousand waited on him,

² As told in the First Book of Maccabees

³ God, as the One who is older than time and attracting the veneration of all history.

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ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.

The court was in session
and the books lay open.

(Dan 7: 9 – 10; JB)

So God, enthroned in glory, begins judgement upon the great empires and the boastful king. Daniel saw the terrible beast killed and its body destroyed; but the other beasts (the other empires) were allowed to continue for a while. The vision ends with an awesome and splendid revelation:

I saw, coming on the clouds of heaven
one like a son of man.

He came to the Ancient of Days
and was led into his presence.

On him was conferred rule,
honor and kingship,

and all peoples, nations and languages became his servants.

His rule is an everlasting rule
which will never pass away,

and his kingship will never come to an end. (Dan 7: 13 – 14; JB)

He saw, “coming on the clouds of heaven one like a son of man”. We should not imagine a glorious figure descending from heaven, from the very throne of God, to judge the earth, since the movement is quite the opposite. The “one like a son of man” comes to God, not from God. The image is that of a chosen servant or officer being brought into the presence of the king, in public session, to be confirmed in high office.

He came to the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. On him was conferred rule, honour and kingship.

Daniel’s figure is symbolic, as Daniel himself tells us, of the faithful and persecuted nation of Israel. It is they who are represented by the “one like a son of man”, and who, sanctified in their relationship with God’ will receive authority over the nations. The beast is the ruler Antiochus, who made war on the holy ones of God and overpowered them for a time, until the judgement of God gave the kingdom to his holy ones.⁴

He will blaspheme against the Most High
and persecute the holy ones of God.

⁴ Dan 7: 21 – 23

He will make plans to change the seasons and the Law⁵
and the holy ones will be handed over to him
for a time, two times and half a time.⁶
But the court will sit and his power will be taken away,
utterly destroyed forever.
Soverenty and rule,
the greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven,
will be handed over to the holy ones, the people of the Most High,
whose rule is everlasting,
whom every empire will serve and obey. (Dan 7: 25 – 27; JB and NIV)

When Jesus speaks of the “son of man” there is much for his hearers to draw on, if they know the prophets and the psalms. If he applies the title to himself, we are reminded of the prophet Ezekiel, especially when we find (as we shall a little further on⁷) that he identifies his coming death in Jerusalem with the suffering of the prophets. When he speaks of another, glorious figure to come, it will remind us more of the psalms and the Book of Daniel – tho with significant differences. However, wide tho the difference is between the humble self- reference of the “son of man” and the glorious figure of the “Son of Man” appearing in judgement, or the “one like a son of man” coming on the clouds, we are not to think of them as separate realities, to decide, on each usage, which is in mind. The glorious figure of the Son of Man is the humble prophet before God. It is all of a piece with Miriam’s self-reference:

He has looked upon the littleness of his maidservant;
from this day on all generations will call me blessed. (1: 48)

and with the mystery of Jesus’ death, his coming arrival in Jerusalem as Jerusalem’s King and his execution there as a criminal.

When we hear Jesus speak of the “son of man”, it is not to be passed over lightly.

The first occasions came in two passages where Luke was using the material he found in Mark’s gospel, where Jesus claimed that “the Son of Man” had the authority to forgive sin⁸ and to rule over the sabbath.⁸ Mity claims

⁵ Antiochus banned the observance of the Sabbath and Jewish festivals. He planned to unite his whole kingdom in one set of customs and religious practice, doing away with the distinctive Jewish Law. See the First Book of Maccabees 1: 41 – 53.

⁶ The persecution of Antiochus lasted roughly three and a half years. (JB notes)

⁷ 13: 33 – 34

⁸ 5: 24, 6: 5

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indeed! He was clearly referring to himself, since he was defending his own actions in forgiving sin and in declaring the proper terms of the sabbath. Tho he used the humble self-reference of the prophet Ezekiel, his claim went further, as we saw, than any prophet's before him, even Moses. Forgiving sin, he stood in the very place of God, and ruling over the sabbath put him in charge of God's Law and Israel's national identity.

On the next two occasions, Luke was giving us material we also find in Matthew.⁹ In one of them¹⁰ Jesus was again clearly referring to himself, the son of man, who, in contrast to John's asceticism, came "eating and drinking", and was criticised for it. In the other,¹¹ he declared the blessing of his disciples who, suffering like the prophets before them, would be denounced and criminalised on account of the Son of Man.

For the son of man himself is going to suffer and to be treated as a criminal. The next three references came from Mark's material, and referred to that suffering, and the challenge to remain faithful in the face of the persecution we will suffer. "The Son of Man" will have to suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders and the priests ..." ¹² "Keep this always in mind: the Son of Man is going to be handed over into the power of men." ¹³ "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in glory ..." ¹⁴

Finally (to catch up with where we now are in the gospel) there were two more references which Luke shares with Matthew. Speaking of the tuff demands on those who join his mission, Jesus sed: "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." ¹⁵ And speaking of the prophet Jonah, how he had been a sign to the Ninevites, he sed that the Son of Man would be such a sign to the present generation. ¹⁶

When Jesus speaks of the Son of Man, he is speaking of himself. But occasionally, when he speaks of the Son of Man coming in glory, it is probable that it was still open, at the time he spoke, to interpretation as another, glorious figure to come at the final judgement. It would seem that this was safer than publicly claiming to be the Messiah (the Son of God) which was more likely to have people running away with their own expectations of what the Messiah would be. His teaching drew their minds to what the kingdom of God, and life in it, would be like; for only as they began to experience the rule of God would they understand what the coming

⁹ the common document(s) or "Q" ¹⁰ 7: 34 ¹¹ 6: 22
¹² 9: 22 ¹³ 9: 44 ¹⁴ 9: 26 ¹⁵ 9: 58 ¹⁶ 11: 30

of the Messiah really ment. Meanwhile, his use of the term “son of man” reminded them that he came among them as a prophet and not as a wielder of power, while it also kept before them the ultimate prospect of judgement and decision in the full authority of God. The “one like a son of man” who was, in Daniel’s vision, Israel itself judging the nations, would become, finally, the Son of Man judging each one, in Israel as in all the nations, by their response to the messengers of God.

* * *

I felt that this was the right time to go back over the several references to the “son of man” because they are important for understanding what we now hear, and will be important for understanding the climax of the gospel in the death and the resurrection of Jesus.

What holds together a number of sayings at this point is the theme of openness and public accountability, and while the “son of man” as God’s prophet is the challenge to face the truth while it is still possible to make up your mind how you will respond, the “Son of Man” to come will be the coming of truth itself, in all the authority of God, to bring to light and declare judgment on all our decisions.

Jesus told his disciples:

anyone who declares himself in public for me, the Son of Man will declare himself for them before the angels of God. Anyone who disowns me, afraid to acknowledge me in public, will be disowned before the angels of God. (12: 8 – 9)

They will be arraigned at public meetings, in front of their neighbors, hauled before the magistrates and denounced to powerful authorities, but they are not to be afraid. They are not to worry about what they will say, how they will defend themselves, for the Holy Spirit will give them the words to say when the words are needed.¹⁷

¹⁷ It will probably be noticed that I have missed out a difficult verse: the “sin against the Holy Spirit”. That is because it could lead to a very long digression. Luke mentions it here, differently from the other evangelists, because of the connection he sees with the future role of the Spirit in the witness of the disciples. Opposition to Jesus now can be forgiven, for people don’t see who he is, but when the Spirit of God is manifestly at work, it will be fatal to deny it. When Jesus speaks of forgivable and unforgivable sin, I think he is using “forgive” in the looser sense of “excuse”. I am certain from Jesus’ teaching everywhere else that he does not mean there is a sin which, even if we’re sorry for it and want to turn back, we can’t, because God won’t forgive us.

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Such faith does not mean counting on a miracle. Even in very ordinary circumstances, too much preparation of your defence can lead to its collapse when the attack comes from an unexpected direction, or shows itself already prepared for your prepared answers. Trust in God is a practical recognition that, in conflict, our responses will have to be decided on the spot. But when we are on the spot as Jesus' followers, the Spirit of God will show us how to respond.

Jesus now confronts authorities as the prophets once did, speaking out the truth with courage and trust in God. Soon his followers will be challenged to do the same, for conflict will be normal. It's what they are to expect, and in it, the Spirit of God will be at work as the Spirit has always been at work, in heroes, kings and prophets, to declare and to bring about the kind of world that God intends to rule, the kind of people and society God intends God's people to be. The Spirit of God will give them what they are to say, not just to defend themselves, nor even to proclaim a religious doctrine, but to declare with authority the will of God for the behavior even of the world's most powerful authorities.

We might think of heroic martyrs under the Roman Empire; or the saints who stood up to a corrupt Roman church, even in the flames of torture, for the truth declared in the Bible; or the other saints who proclaimed their Catholic faith in the shadow of the scaffold and the quartering knives; or heroic missionaries who faced savage pagans in barbarous lands; or the heroes of the modern church who braved the mind-bending torture of communist prisons. And so we should, for all these have done well, declaring themselves for Jesus.

But we honor the martyrs from the safety of distance and somehow we've contrived to exercise our own Christian faith without any danger to body, property or reputation. How fortunate for us that Jesus was over-pessimistic! All that hauling before the authorities, in danger of our lives, has not happened to us for a very long time. It's a good three hundred years since any British Christians were in danger of prison for their beliefs, and nigh on two hundred since being a Catholic or a dissenter deprived you of opportunity and respect in British society.

But we underestimate what Jesus meant by declaring ourselves for him "in the presence of men". Yes, it means having the courage in a secular and scoffing world to say that I believe, and that I trust in Jesus Christ; but apart from a bit of teasing from unbelieving peers, such witness does me no harm. I'm not hauled before the magistrates for my beliefs.

We don't suffer. We are not persecuted, because we do not proclaim the good news that Jesus proclaimed at Nazareth and we do not confront the corrupt authorities of our society as Jesus confronted the Pharisees, the lawyers and the synagogue leaders. Christian believers, in their various churches, have redefined their faith to exclude those things which are important to the world. Secularism gives the world leave to go its way. (The church has learnt its lesson. We no longer meddle with politics.) The self-righteous independence of the bourgeois (Money-making is its own justification; success is proof of God's approval; free-enterprise should not be checked by law; the church's calling is not economics.) has cut us off from the whole message of the prophets (who are now limited to the foretelling of Jesus Christ) and any sense of commitment to the manifesto which Jesus announced at Nazareth. We are left with a message that is no challenge to the world and brings us into no danger.

Those who control society, the presidents, the parliaments, the defence chiefs, the investors, the chairmen of banks and big corporations and the geniuses of the advertising industry, operate in a worldly sphere that is not the concern of Christian evangelism or the saving work of Jesus Christ. (In their private lives, they may be committed and born-again Christians, but that's separate.) That heresy I have often referred to now comes into its own. The message of Jesus, and our concern as Christians, is not this passing world, but the other world of heaven, where the kingdom is. This world may carry on largely undisturbed by us.

Protest, almost by definition, must stay outside the church. To speak out, or to march in the streets against injustice, domination in trade, war and weapons of mass destruction; to challenge both business and government for their selfish exploitation of the poor; to question an economy built on debt, and to urge a radical reform of the structures of our society, in short, to behave like a prophet, is seen to be straying from our proper concern: the winning of souls for a kingdom above, where Jesus awaits us. We tell ourselves that the nations are independent of him and outside his rule, not really from a spiritual concern, but from fear of what will follow if we confront our nations with the challenge of God's kingdom already taking shape among us.

We have distanced our faith from the world, but we have not distanced ourselves. We still work and make money like anyone else, and complain if the government does not keep the economic ship afloat. We, too, expect our profit. We argue and take part in politics – or at least we complain bitterly when the politics go wrong. Above all, we identify fiercely, passionately with our nations. We are Americans or British with an enthusiasm that probably

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exceeds our enthusiasm for anything Christian. In fact, it sometimes seems, in America, that the churches only get their legitimacy by being manifestly patriotic – the flag always flying beside the cross.¹⁸

What started, particularly in America, as a healthy and progressive move to separate church and state, became a demand that the body of Christians should surrender their right to challenge the prevailing order. (In a healthy society, every body of citizens, however they group themselves, should retain that right to challenge.) Eventually it became a requirement lodged by Christians themselves, who were anxious to avoid the uncomfortable consequences of such a challenge. We preferred a theology that didn't mix with politics and a gospel that didn't engage with economics.

We forgot how much Jesus identified with the prophets, and how the prophets always called on Israel, the nation and the people, to repent. We forgot how Anna spoke of him to those who were looking to the liberation of Jerusalem, how he addressed the city and wept over it, how he died because he challenged Jerusalem. When the Pharisees, or the priests, stood by the Law, they were standing for Israel against everything Roman and pagan, and when Jesus clashed with them, it was a clash of views on what Israel should be.

Our plan of comfortable separation has not worked. With only half the gospel to go on, we find ourselves in an appalling wilderness where the church is nearly dead, society without vision or principle, and the only unifying forces are the power of money, for those in control, and the tribal instincts of patriotism for those who have to obey. We are not hauled before the magistrates, detained on suspicion of terrorism, consigned to oblivion in

¹⁸ I have to confess that I've been negative here. I'm describing the great bulk of the church as it has been for several generations now. But the truth is that for some time there have been counter-cultural movements: Evangelical, Catholic and liberal. The Catholic Worker movement started by Dorothy Day in 1930s New York, the role of Black-led churches in the civil rights movement from the 1950s onward, and the Sojourners communities of evangelical Christians, begun in Washington in the 1970s are clear examples. And even where protest movements do not adopt a "Christian" label, they often include exemplary Christians with other believers and humanists. In Britain, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) has always had a strong Christian component. More generally, thank God, more and more churches in America, Britain and Australia are coming to recognise that their Christian place is with the protesters, or in serious lobbying or making the case for issues of poverty, vulnerability and justice. In fact, I'm happy to say that we don't have to look far to see the picture I have not developed here, and to recognise the prophetic body that Jesus ment his followers to be.

Guantanamo Bay, for we say nothing that would upset our rulers, and our patriotism forbids us even to contemplate the possibility that our own people might be in the wrong before God. Repentance is only for private individuals.

We have become ashamed of Jesus Christ, ashamed of everything in his manifesto and in his teaching that impinges on the politics of our modern world, and embarrassed by the things in the gospel that challenge its economics. We do not declare ourselves for Christ. To nations built on denial of the values and the ways of the kingdom, we raise no serious challenge. They're our nations and we want to live with them.

How will it go with us, when we stand before the Son of Man, in the presence of God's angels?

If Jesus has come as the Savior and King, as the angels proclaimed, if the vision of John the Baptist was fulfilled and the manifesto proclaimed at Nazareth was of any meaning for subsequent history, the world and its great nations as we now have them are not in accord with the will of God. They are not reflecting that peace, that justice, that love that he inaugurated and taught; and his disciples are challenged to speak out, even against them.

Generally, we have not fallen back into the self-righteous legalism of the Pharisees. (In fact, we congratulate ourselves for having abandoned all that with the Victorian era.) But we have managed – woefully managed – to ensure a form and practice of the Christian faith where we never need to rely on the Holy Spirit for our words of challenge, because we do not attempt to challenge the society in which we live, and that society is quite content for us to be so harmless a thing as Christians.