

May 17, 2009

The Sunday of the Samaritan Woman

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

A peculiar feature of the gospels is Jesus' habitual reference to Himself in the "third person" as Son of Man. Several aspects of this unusual form of self-reference are worthy of remark:

First, the expression "Son of Man" is found in all four gospels---as an auto-identification in every instance. It is invariably a title Jesus assumes for Himself, an expression of His self-interpretation. It is never found in the gospels except on the lips of Jesus.

This fact raises an adequate rebuttal, I think, to any suggestion that the early Christians---or even one of the evangelists---devised the term "Son of Man" as a way of describing Jesus. The title certainly came from Jesus, not the Church. For this reason the expression is never found in St. Paul or the New Testament's other epistolary literature.

Moreover, the title was not destined to play a major role in the later development of Christology. Over the centuries the people of God have invoked Jesus in numerous ways, but "Son of Man" is not one of them.

Second, when Jesus used the term, it was a real title, not a mere description. The consistent presence of the definite article (the Son of Man) makes it unlikely that the expression is to be understood in the gospels simply as an equivalent of "human being" (as was the case, for instance, when God addressed Ezekiel as "son of man"). When Jesus used the term, it was in the context of His activities in this world.

Third, because Jesus' use of "Son of Man" was idiosyncratic, His understanding of the expression is best determined, not by its meanings elsewhere (as it appears in Psalm 8, for instance), but through the specific contexts in which He used it.

Fourth, those contexts indicate that Jesus' understanding of this term was chiefly indebted to the Book of Daniel. Prominent among the visions of that prophet, we read: "I was watching in the night visions, / And behold, like a son of man, / Coming with the clouds of heaven! / He came to the Ancient of Days, / And they brought him near before Him. / Then to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, / That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. / His dominion is an everlasting dominion, / Which shall not pass away, /

And his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed" (7:13-14).

"Son of Man," nonetheless, underwent a transformation from Daniel to Jesus. Although the gospels invariably use the definite article (*ho*) to modify the "Son of Man," Daniel did not. On the lips of Jesus, "Son of Man" is a real title, whereas in Daniel the expression was simply descriptive: "*like a son of man*" (Aramaic *kebar 'enesh*; LXX *hos huios anthropou*). Daniel's emphasis was placed on the common humanity---even the "humane" quality---of the messianic kingdom, which was contrasted with the beastly character of the earlier and worldly empires: Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece (7:3-8).

Nonetheless, Daniel certainly understood the son of man---a truly human figure who approaches the Ancient of Days and receives "authority"---as a reference to the Messiah, whose reign is to be the proper goal and fulfillment of world history.

Fifth, except in a quotation of Psalm 8, "Son of Man" appears in only two New Testament books outside the four gospels. In each of these cases the context is a vision of Jesus enthroned and glorified. Thus, when Stephen "saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God," he announced to his murderers, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" (Acts 7:55-56) In addition to Stephen, John saw "like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band" (Revelation 1:13).

Sixth, Daniel's vision of the end of history would later be replicated by John the Seer, who used Daniel's identical expression (*hos huios anthropou*---without the definite article): "Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and on the cloud sat like a son of man, having on His head a golden crown, and in His hand a sharp sickle" (Revelation 14:14).

Seventh, slightly later than Daniel---but prior to John---the expression "son of man" was used in certain intertestamental books, to designate the Elect One, who would prevail over mighty kings and become the final arbiter of history. Those texts expressed an identical messianic hope.

What Daniel beheld and foretold, Jesus knew to be fulfilled in Himself, as He opened history's final chapter.

This understanding of Daniel's expression-messianic heir and judge of history-lay at the base of Jesus' claim to be the Son of Man. The final time He used this auto-identification was at His trial before the Sanhedrin: "Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, 'Are You the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed?' Jesus

said, 'I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven'" (Mark 14: 61-62).

The only thing new to Jesus' claim on this occasion was the irony of its public and juridical setting. He had already used the identical language to tell His disciples, "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels" (8: 38).

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