

Is the Son of Man Divine?

by Servetus the Evangelical

Jesus' favorite title he applied to himself was "the Son of Man." The New Testament (NT) gospels relate he did so on about 39 occasions, and it was only him who did.

The occasion on which Jesus most clearly identified himself as the Son of Man was when he healed a man who had been blind from birth (John 9.1-12). He later asked him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered and said, 'And who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?' Jesus said to him, 'You have both seen Him, and He is the one who is talking with you.' And he said, 'Lord, I believe' (vv. 35-38).

Christians have always connected Jesus' portrayal of himself as the Son of Man with the Old Testament (OT) account of Daniel's prophetic vision about four beasts that depict four, successive, Gentile world empires (Daniel 7.2-12). Daniel further relates concerning the end of this time period, "Behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days [God] and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the people, nations and men of every language might serve Him" (Daniel 7.13-14).

Church fathers connected Jesus' self-designation as the Son of Man to Daniel 7.13-14, but they never emphasized this title since they thought it signified his humanity. But many modern Bible scholars have thought the opposite. They have insisted that Daniel's Son of Man figure is divine. So, if it portrays Jesus, then Jesus is divine.

Oscar Cullmann claims that Jesus drew upon Daniel's Son of Man figure and "that by means of this very term Jesus spoke of his divine heavenly character." And I. Howard Marshall says Jesus' use of Daniel's Son of Man figure indicates both his humanity and "divine origin" because "he comes from heaven."

So, some Christian scholars have thought Jesus preexisted and was divine because Daniel's Son of Man is a heavenly figure and/or Jesus will come from heaven as he returns to earth. James Dunn rightly counters, "It by no means follows that a figure in an apocalyptic vision is pre-existent simply because he appears before God in heaven."

Indeed, normative Judaism always allowed for the belief in various human beings preexisting, and they were not conceived as divine. They included the ante-diluvian Enoch, the priest-king Melchizedek, the law-giver Moses, and the prophet Elijah. Such beliefs were never thought to imperil Judaism's strict monotheism.

Some Christian scholars cite Second Temple Jewish apocalyptic literature, such as the Similitudes (=1 Enoch 37-71) and perhaps 4 Ezra, to support that the Son of Man preexisted his human life (1 Enoch 48.6; 62.7; 4 Ezra 12.32; 13.3, 26), making him divine. The Similitudes do mention "the Son of Man" fourteen times, and both of these sources identify him as "the Messiah" (1 Enoch 48.10; 52.4; 4 Ezra 7.28-29; 12.32). They also seem to attribute to him preexistence (1 Enoch 48.2, 6; 62.6-7; 4 Ezra 12.32; 13.26). But they never identify him as either divine or God. Besides, they should be viewed as commentaries on Daniel's Son of Man.

Some Christian scholars interpret Daniel's Son of Man as an individual who is "divine," "deity," or "god/God" because he comes "with the clouds of heaven." For support, they cite several parallel OT texts that describe God riding on clouds or being

pictured in clouds (Exodus 13.21; 20.21; Psalm 97.2; 104.3; Isaiah 19.1). They claim this activity is a prerogative belonging only to God; but they assume this arbitrarily.

Judaism always repudiated the idea that the Messiah is God, whether he comes on clouds or not. The Talmud states that if Jews ever become “deserving,” their Messiah will come to them triumphantly “with clouds of heaven;” but if not, he will come “lowly and riding upon an ass” (*Sanhedrin* 98a). Judaism even taught that when Moses died he ascended on a cloud to heaven. So, Jews never restricted riding on clouds to deity.

Jesus quoted from Daniel 7.13 when he predicted concerning his return, “they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory” (Matthew 24.30). And we read more about it, “BEHOLD, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS” (Revelation 1.7). (The NASB translation places all NT quotations of the OT in small caps. So, these small caps are a quotation from Daniel 7.13.)

Christians certainly should not think that riding on clouds indicates divinity. The Apostle Paul teaches about their future resurrection, saying that they “shall be caught up ... in the clouds to meet the Lord [Jesus] in the air” (2 Thessalonians 4.17).

Daniel’s account of the Son of Man does not preclude that he could have lived an earthly life prior to his reception in heaven of an earthly kingdom, in which case he merely would have awaited the long interval. The chronological order of events of Jesus life as the Son of Man, then, would be as follows: (1) he is born and lives an earthly life; (2) then occurs his death, resurrection, heavenly ascension, and exaltation to God’s right hand; (3) the long time interval transpires; (4) the heavenly court passes judgment on the fourth kingdom on earth; (5) a royal coronation ceremony immediately follows in heaven, in which the Son of Man is given the kingdom and crowned as its king; (6) he then descends to earth, bringing his kingdom with him; (7) he destroys the fourth kingdom on earth and replaces it with his eternal kingdom.

Much of this is what Jesus had indeed taught in his parable of the nobleman (Luke 19.11-27), referring to himself. He said, “A certain nobleman went to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself, and then return” (v. 12). Upon his return the nobleman announced, “these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in my presence” (v. 27). Neither this parable nor Daniel’s account of the Son of Man requires that Jesus is divine or God.