The Origin of the Johannine “Son of Man” Sayings

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Introduction

The Johannine “Son of Man” expression in the Fourth Gospel has seldom been the focus of scholarly research. Most scholars have considered the Johannine Son of Man sayings as not having historical worth, and research on this subject in the Gospel of John has developed almost in isolation from research of the Synoptic Son of Man.1 According to Barnabas Lindars, the Son of Man issue is “the great centre of debate in New Testament studies of the Twentieth century.”2 Generally speaking, the issue in the debate is not simple but complex, encroaching on several research areas, such as, among others, Semitic linguistics, history of religions, the historical Jesus quest, the development of the Synoptic tradition, and the theology of the Gospel of John.

Each area has itself become such a center of debate that no agreed upon solution may be possible.3 Rudolf Bultmann, one of the best known figures in New Testament studies, divided the Son of Man sayings into three groups—his future coming as judge, his earthly activity, and his suffering.4 It is not necessary to agree with Bultmann who points also to the Gnostic descending-ascending motif. He also questioned the authenticity of most of the sayings, arguing that those which dealt with Jesus’ earthly activity arose from a mistranslation of the Aramaic into Greek, while the predictions of suffering were vaticina ex eventu. However, most interpreters are prepared to grant that at least some of the Son of Man sayings find an authentic origin in the teaching of Jesus, but in the most recent studies a renewed skepticism has arisen about the authenticity of some of the Son of Man sayings (i.e., the so-called apocalyptic Son of Man).5 It

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1 To the best of my knowledge, scholars only started to investigate the Son of Man sayings in the Gospel of John just four decades ago. The reason was the lack of literature written on the issue when compared to the several written on the Synoptic Son of Man.
2 Barnabas Lindars, Jesus Son of Man: A Fresh Examination of the Son of Man Sayings in the Gospels (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 1.
3 The present skepticism is in contrast to the relative consensus of scholarship two decades ago. Only future sayings had claims for authenticity.
is not the interest of this study to deal with or defend the authenticity of the “apocalyptic Son of Man” sayings, nor is it my interest to deal with the question of the messianic connotations of the expression Son of Man in first-century Judaism.

Rather than solving the Son of Man problem, the debate has sharpened the issue and in some instances—particularly in the origin of Johannine Son of Man saying—has failed to clarify the issue. If there were no particular form in pre-Christian Aramaic, its origin as a Greek expression also remains unfounded. Frequently, the debate places atomized emphasis on “sayings” without adequate attention to the context and larger literary genre in which the sayings appear. Scholars disagree in their general assessment of the emphasis in the Gospel of John’s Son of Man concept. A few scholars propose the view that the difference between the Synoptic and Johannine Son of Man should not be overstated. Robert Maddox asserts that “in spite of considerable differences of vocabulary and imagery, the fundamental significance of the title ‘the Son of Man’ in John is not different from that which it has in the Synoptic Gospels.”

However, the exploration of the origins of the Son of Man does not automatically give the solution to the problems, since disagreements over the meaning of possible background material can and do affect scholarly understanding of the Son of Man in John. How then do we explain the major differences between the Johannine Son of Man sayings and those of the Synoptics?

In contrast, some studies have made an attempt also to place the Johannine sayings within the Synoptic Son of Man categories: (1) earthly, (2) suffering, (3) and coming/glory/apocalyptic sayings. The expression “Son of Man” as a reference to Jesus is common to all four Gospels, and this title in the Gospel of John has played a significant part in discussions of early Christology. It is one of those Christological titles, and its origin and meaning have continued to puzzle New Testament scholars. I contend that the Son of Man expression is used in the Gospel of John to refer to and emphasize the humanity of Jesus. In addition, there has long been a debate regarding where the Jewish use of the

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8 Müller, *The Expression*, 388.