

“Son of man” and exegetical myths

Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole¹

United Bible Societies

Nairobi, Kenya

Abstract

This article aims to show that some of the New Testament interpretations of the "son of man" phrase appear to be, according to B Lindars "a myth, created, not by the thinkers of the New Testament times, but by modern critical scholarship." This view is substantiated in two ways: the first deals with an exegesis of the expression "son of man", while the second highlights some exegetical myths about "son of man". The first part includes sections on the linguistic origin of "son of man", "son of man" in the history of religions, and "son of man" as a historical figure according to Mark and Q. The second part comprises the sections dealing with the understanding of myth, and the myth of the "son of man" as a messianic title adopted by Jesus and by the early Church.

1. INTRODUCTION

The "son of man" question is still the subject of intense debate among New Testament scholars. This paper aims to show that some of the New Testament interpretations of the "son of man" phrase appear to be “a myth, created, not by the thinkers of the New Testament times, but by modern critical scholarship” (Lindars 1983:8). This view is substantiated in two ways: the first deals with a common exegesis of "son of man", while the second highlights some exegetical myths about "son of man". The first part includes sections on the linguistic origin

¹ Dr Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole is an international advisor on the editorial board of *HTS Theological Studies*. He visited the University of Pretoria in April 2003 as research associate of Prof Dr Andries G van Aarde (Department of New Testament Studies) to participate in the research project “Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics”, directed by Prof Van Aarde. This paper was also presented at the NTTSA Annual Meeting, the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg (South Africa), April 22-25, 2003.

of "son of man", "son of man" in the history of religions, and "son of man" as a historical figure according to Mark and Q. The second part comprises the sections dealing with the understanding of myth and the myth of the "son of man" as a messianic title adopted by Jesus or by the early Church.

2. AN EXEGESIS OF "SON OF MAN"

2.1 Linguistic origin of the expression "son of man"

There is general consensus among biblical scholars that the expression "son of man" originated from the Aramaic language. In Aramaic biblical and extra-biblical sources, the expression translated as "son of man", appears in different forms and states. One form is written with the vowel aleph (*bar enash* or *bar enasha*), and is found in the Babylonian Talmud (Vermes 1967:316-317). This form is also regarded as characteristic of Middle Aramaic (300 BC-AD 200) (Svedlund 1974:21-22; Lindars 1983:194). Another form, written without aleph (*bar nash* or *bar nasha*) occurs in Galilean Aramaic of not earlier than 200 AD (Fitzmyer 1979:62). Moreover, in the Aramaic antiquity the primitive form of this expression was written as one word with four consonants *brnsh* (Kearns 1978:36-38), whereas the later form, dated from AD 200 onwards, is written as one word with consonants and vowels, *barnash* or *barnasha* (Svedlund 1974:21-22). Therefore, in Aramaic writings "son of man" appears in one primitive form (*brnsh*), one middle form (*bar enash*) and two posterior forms (*bar nash* and *barnash*).

As far as the state is concerned, Aramaic "son of man" is found in absolute state (*bar nash* or *bar enash*), emphatic state (*bar nasha* or *bar enasha*) and in construct state, the sense of which depends on the particular context. In absolute state, the expression has a generic and an indefinite sense (a human being), while in the emphatic state, it carries a definite sense (this human being). In addition, the Aramaic "son of man" is also used in the sense of a circumlocution for the third or first personal pronoun singular. When used as a circumlocution for the first personal pronoun singular, the "son of man" expression indicates various types of auto-reference: exclusive auto-reference (where the speaker only refers to himself),

inclusive auto-reference (where the speaker refers to himself as well as to all other human beings) and idiomatic auto-reference (where the speaker refers to himself and to a group of people of his position).

Notwithstanding the different forms and states, the central meaning of the Aramaic expression seems to have remained the same, namely a male human person. In other words, in Aramaic the expression "son of man" refers to a human being in generic, indefinite and circumlocutional sense (Vermes 1967:315; Bietenhard 1982:272; Lindars 1983:194; Kümmel 1984:160; Casey 1987:27-28).

2.2 "Son of man" in the history of religions

"Son of man" has been perceived as a Jewish equivalent of a godly figure in the myths of ancient oriental religions. In the Persian Empire, this figure is called Primordial Man to which are ascribed qualities such as preexistence, divinity, judgment of the world and ascension (Von Gall 1926:409-414). The same figure has as its equivalent in Egypt the god Rê-Horus (Gressman 1929:404-405), while in Iran it is regarded as a fusion between the angel Sraosa and the savior Saoshjant (Meyer 1929:199) or in Babylon as Marduk (Gunkel 1921:199) and Baal in the Canaanite myth of Ras Shamra (Colpe 1967:411-422). According to Mowinckel (1954:425), the concept of Primordial Man or Divine Anthropos played an important role in religious, philosophical, and gnostic speculations in the ancient Middle East and in the Hellenistic world. The following are examples of other appellations also used to refer to a similar figure: Man, Gayomart, the One like a man, Anthropos, Adam, Adamus, Adamanus, Anosh, Enosh, Great Man, the True Man, the Man according to the Image, the Heavenly Man, Mortal Immortality, etc (Mowinckel 1954:425; Borsch 1967:55).

In Jewish religion Adam, in particular, is regarded as the primordial man, created as immortal by God, but who, together with his descendants became mortal because of sin (Gn 1-3), while ben adam is regarded as any human being, or the offspring of the mortal Adam. Jewish conception of "the man" or "the son of man" might be a variant of the oriental, cosmological and eschatological myth of Anthropos (Mowinckel 1956:425). In Jewish literature, "son of man" is found in

apocalyptic writings (Dn 7:13; 1 Enoch 46-71 and 4 Ezr 13:3). In Dn 7:13-14, the one like a son of man is given an everlasting authority over all nations, races and languages. The son of man figure in this context might not refer to an individual, but rather is used as a symbol of the Kingdom of Israel, which, in comparison to other kingdoms represented by beasts, looks human. In the Ethiopic translation of the book of Enoch (the original is lost), different expressions are used to refer to the son of man figure (Charles 1893:128; Kuzenzama 1990:17; Charlesworth 1985:89). In 1 Enoch 46:2.3.4; 48:2 he is called *walda sab'e* (*filius hominis*, son of a human being). In 1 Enoch 49:29 and 71:14 he is designated by *wald'a be'esi* (*filius viri*, son of a male human being). In 1 Enoch 69:29 he is portrayed as *wald'a be'esit* (*filius mulieri*, son of a female human being). In 1 Enoch 62:7.9.14; 63:11; 69:26.27; 70:1; 71:17 he is called *walda 'eguala 'emmaheiw* (*filius prolis matris viventium*, son from the spring of the livings' mother). The various Ethiopic translations indicate that the figure is a human being. In the book of IV Ezra 13, the son of man figure comes from the sea, but such idea is strange to Jewish eschatology.

In the history of religions, "son of man" may refer to a mythological human figure with divine attributes such as a pre-existent being, as well as to the eschatological judge of the world. However, it is interesting to note that in the ancient Middle East, there is no obvious indication of the use of the term "son of man" as a mythological figure, except for some interpretative associations with certain mythological figures such as Primordial Man, Rê-Horus, Marduk Man, Divine Anthropos, Gayomart, the One like a man, Anthropos, Adam, Adamus, Adamanus, Anosh, Enosh, Great Man, the True Man, the Man according to the Image, the Heavenly Man, and Mortal Immortality.

2.3 “Son of man” as a historical figure

In African contexts, some people, for example the Congolese musician artists Mbilia Bel, Koffi Olomide, Madilu Système, and others, refer to themselves using the terms “mwana wa moto” (son of man/woman or daughter of man/woman). Similarly, a Kenyan novelist refers to himself as a son of woman (Mangua

1998/2000). Generally speaking, ordinary African audiences understand son of man as an idiom denoting a speaker who is a human being (Loba-Mkole 2000b: 557-566). Except for some Jewish rabbis who have used the Aramaic “hahu gabra” (“that man”) and “bar nash” to refer to themselves (Vermes 1967:320, 327), Jesus of Nazareth seems to be the only historical and religious person who has used "son of man" in the circumlocutional sense in addition to the generic and indefinite sense. However, none of the New Testament sayings has unequivocally been proven as being an authentic utterance of Jesus. In light of the criterion of multiple attestation and dissimilarity, one can merely make an educated guess that Jesus did in fact use the "son of man" expression as auto-reference, although the authentic wording might have been lost or placed in different contexts by the gospels. According to Tuckett (2001:390), ascribing son of man to the “historical” Jesus seems entirely appropriate.

From a historical viewpoint, the Jesus who might have referred to himself as "son of man" is known as a Jewish charismatic religious man, teacher, prophet, or wise man. He was born in circa 4 BCE, near the time of the death of Herod the Great and spent his childhood and early adulthood in Nazareth. He was baptized by John the Baptist. This event is seen as a turning point in Jesus' life. He called disciples, proclaimed the Kingdom of God in the towns, villages and countryside of Galilee. When he was about 30 years old, he undertook a journey to Jerusalem for the Passover and created a disturbance in the Temple area. He had a final meal with the disciples, whereafter he was arrested and interrogated by Jewish authorities, especially the high priest. He was executed (crucified) on the orders of the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate. His disciples at first fled. They saw him (in what sense is not certain) after his death. As a result, they believed that he could return to found the kingdom and they formed a community to await his return and sought to win others to faith in him as God's Messiah (Sanders 1993:10-11; Van Aarde 2001:59).

According to Van Aarde (2001:46), Jesus grew up as a fatherless child. In first-century Galilee, fatherless children were marginalized and not considered as children of God. Yet, Jesus' followers considered him to be just that – the child of

God. Consequently, New Testament writings apply the metaphor "Son of God" to Jesus in light of his experience as that of being a child of God. They use this metaphor to signify Jesus' unmediated access to God in terms of divine origin and power. The combination of divine origin and power is supported by the stories of a miraculous birth, wondrous deeds, death, resurrection and ascension. During New Testament times, portrayals of divine birth and adoption were well known, for instance that of Hercules, Perseus, Horus and Priapus. Among these figures, Hercules stands out, not only because of his divine conception, but also for having been adopted as child of Zeus when he conquered death (cf Van Aarde 2001:165). Paul's Jesus was a Hercules figure who, on account of his victory over death through resurrection, was publicly and mightily declared to be God's child. Luke might have been influenced by this idea, but he ascribes Jesus' divine sonship to his conception (Van Aarde 2001:198). It is indeed this very fatherless child Jesus, child and Son of God, who used to call himself son of man. It is astonishing to note that the concept "son of man" was exegetically and perhaps wrongly associated with mythological divine figures in the ancient religions from the Middle East, whereas the title "Son of God" is evidenced in the Greek myths. Jesus might be the only historical figure accorded with both "son of man" and "Son of God" appellations, though in the former case, he used the appellation to refer to himself, whereas the latter was a confession from his followers.

2.4 "Son of man" and "Son of God" in the Gospel of Mark

In the Gospel of Mark "son of man" appears 14 times (2:10, 28; 8:31, 38; 9:9, 12,31; 10:33, 45; 13:26; 14:21a, b, 41,62). These occurrences have been classified in three groups (Jackson & Lake 1920:368; Bultmann 1931/1995; 1948/1984:31): the eschatological logia (8:38; 13:26; 14:62), the passion logia (8:31; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33, 45; 14:21a, b, 41, 62) and the logia related to the earthly activity of the "son of man" (2:10, 28). The first part of the Markan gospel (1:1-8:26) contains two passages (2:10, 28) depicting the "son of man" as someone with authority: the authority to forgive sins (2:10) and the authority to be

the master of the Sabbath (2:28). The second part (8:27-16:8) portrays the “son of man” in his passion and in his glory. The mystery of suffering-death-and-resurrection of the “son of man” is solemnly predicted on three occasions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33). The suffering in turn is described as a fact predicted in the Scripture (9:12), as a betrayal by a disciple (14:21a, b), or a handing over to the enemies (14:41). The resurrection as such is reaffirmed in 9:9 following the transfiguration scene. In 10:45 the death of the “son of man” is presented as a ransom for many. It is to be noticed that the “son of man”’s suffering is intrinsically related to his glory. He must (“dei”) endure many sufferings, by being rejected or betrayed by the religious authorities and even his disciple/s, being killed and yet to rise after three days (Hooker 1967:114). His resurrection three days later, demonstrates his power and his glory, and even more so the glory and the power of the Father. This is clearly stated in the eschatological logia (8:38; 13:26; 14:62). It is in the glory of the Father that the “son of man” will witness for or against this generation (8:38). He will be seen coming and gathering his elects in great power and glory (13:26-27). He will be seen seated at the right hand of the Power (God) and coming or going with clouds (14:62). When not preceded or accompanied by a preposition (“apo”, “eis”) the verb “erchomai” does not indicate any direction in itself. It can be translated by either "coming" or "going" (Nida & Louw 1992:5). In Mark 14:62 the participle “erchomenon” is thus best translated as “moving”: You will see the son of man seated at the right hand of God and moving with the clouds of heaven. In this sense, the second part of Mark 14:62 may signify a glorious and powerful manifestation of the “son of man” (cf powerful or glorious manifestation of Yahweh in Deuteronomy 4:11; 5:12; 33:26). This very interpretation of “erchomai” also applies to Mk 13:26.

Some exegetes have used the eschatological sayings to support a Christological meaning of “son of man” (Telford 1999:38.41; Tuckett 2001:394). Previously, Juel (1992:451) had demonstrated that “son of man” in the Gospel of Mark has the meaning of a human being, as it is shown in Aramaic literature. According to him, this expression should not be considered as a title in the same way as Christ and Son of God for the following reasons: It never appears as a

“Son of man” and exegetical myths

predicate; it occurs exclusively on the lips of Jesus who uses it as a means of self-reference (Juel 1992:451). In addition to the sense of self-designation, the particularity of the “son of man” sayings in the Gospel of Mark exists in jointly relating the authority, the suffering and the future glory in paradoxical manner. The “son of man”’s authority is proclaimed in his earthly activity, denied in his passion but reaffirmed by his resurrection and eschatological manifestation (Hooker 1967:181). This very person who used to refer to himself as “son of man” during his earthly life, was also after his death and resurrection declared to be the Son of God.

In the Gospel of Mark, Son of God is exclusively attributed to Jesus, the Christ (1:1, 11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 14:61-62; 15:39). Mark calls Jesus Son of God from the very beginning of his narrative (1:1). In the scenes of the baptism and transfiguration, the heavenly voice introduces Jesus as “my beloved Son” (1:11; 9:7). The demons too call Jesus “Son of God” (3:11; 5:7). In the first part of the Markan gospel (1:1-8:26) only the narrator (1:1), God (5:7; 9:7) and the demons (3:11; 5:7; cf 1:24) have knowledge of Jesus’ divine sonship. In the second part of the gospel (8:27-16:8), this divine sonship is questioned by the high priest (14:61), confirmed by Jesus himself (14:62) and recognized by the centurion (15:39). It has often been observed that Mark’s chief emphasis is on the Son of God as one who is to be recognized as Son of God precisely in his death and not simply in his subsequent resurrection and exaltation (Dunn 1980:48). For Schnackenburg (1994:58), the list of the occurrences of Son of God in Mark can be extended to include 12:6 and 13:32.

Another passage that ought to be mentioned is 14:36 in which Jesus is addressing God as Abba. Similar to “papa” in French (Perrot 1979:280), abba “is a familiar address of a child to his earthly father” (Rowland 1985:255). In that sense, it may be understood as “father dear”, “familiar Daddy” or “my own dear father” (Zeitlin 1988:62; Charlesworth 1989:134; Meier 1991:175). According to Vermes (1983:42), abba could also be applicable to solemn occasions, far removed from childhood situations, for example when Judah threatens the governor of Egypt (his unrecognized brother) saying: “I swear by the life of the

head of abba, if I draw my sword from the scabbard, I will not return it there until the land of Egypt is filled with the slain (Targum Neofiti to Gn 44:18)". In the Democratic Republic of Congo, a child or an adult can use "papa" not only to refer to his biological or social father, but also to a paternal uncle in the patrilineal system or to a friend of his/her father or to any elderly man as a token of respect. Sometimes, a Congolese woman would also call her husband and her father-in-law "papa". In turn, the husband would call his wife's father and sometimes even his wife's uncles "papa".

There is no doubt that the Gospel of Mark displays different panels depicting Jesus as the Son of God. For Schnackenburg (1994:59), the title "Son of God" in Mark serves as a "Deutungskategorie für die irdische Erscheinung und das Wirken Jesu." Vermes (1993:172) had already given more details regarding the Markan characterization of Jesus as the Son of God:

Taken together the three representations, viz. the divine sonship of the Messiah, the testimony of the heavenly voice, and that of demons and men, they clearly demonstrate that Jesus' filial relationship to God was depicted by the creators of the Synoptic tradition, not as part of the general fatherhood of God, but as a phenomenon deserving special attention.

What deserves special attention for Mark is more likely the fact that Jesus starts his mission as the Son of God (1:1, 11) and dies as the Son of God (15:39), after having shown and confessed himself to be the Christ, Son of God and son of man (14:62) in terms of being true God and true man.

2.5 "Son of man" in Q

"Son of man" sayings occur ten times in Q (6:22; 7:34; 9:58; 11:30; 12:8, 10, 40; 17:24, 26, 30). They can be divided into two groups: sayings related to earthly activities (6:22; 7:34; 9:58; 12:10) and sayings related to eschatological manifestations (11:30; 12:8, 40; 17:24, 26, 30). The earthly activity sayings portray the "son of man" as a sign of contradiction. To those people who are persecuted because of him (6:22), he is a blessing. In contrast to John the

“Son of man” and exegetical myths

Baptist, whom the Pharisees regarded as a demon because he fasted and used no wine, the “son of man” is called a glutton, drunkard and a friend of tax collectors and sinners because he has come eating and drinking (7:34). While foxes have holes and birds nests the “son of man” has nowhere to lay his head (9:58).

In the eschatological sayings, the “son of man”'s audience is warned: As Jonah became a sign to people of Nineveh, so will the “son of man” be to this generation (11:30). Everyone who acknowledges Jesus before men, the “son of man” will acknowledge him before the angels of God (12:8). Everyone who speaks a word against the “son of man” will be forgiven, but the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven (12:10). The “son of man” will come at an unexpected hour (12:40). His day will be as a flash of lightning in the sky (17:24). It will resemble the time of Noah (17:26) and the one of Lot (17:30).

The contents of Q sayings suggest that they might have probably originated from exhortation and warning preaching in the earliest Christian communities (Shürmann 1975). As a matter of fact, Q people are credited with preaching the message of the kingdom of God and performing wonders (Q 10:9). In other words, they are committed to carry out the work that Jesus started, namely healing the sick and proclaiming the Kingdom of God (Van den Heever & Scheffler 2001:134-136). However, they are accused of “evil on account of the ‘son of man’” (Q 6:22) and face rejection (Q 10:10-12). In this context, Q people seek to be de-demonized for their activities and associate themselves with the Holy Spirit (Q 12:10). They point to Jesus’ words as a wisdom teacher (Lührmann 2001:205) or as an apocalyptic figure that will receive heavenly vindication (Tuckett 2001:392). Wisdom topic has been considered as a central one in Q tradition and to some extent was used as an important criterion for Q stratification in terms of Q¹, Q² and Q³ (Kloppenber 2001; Vaage 1991:103-129; Tuckett 1993; 2001). Q¹ is claimed to be the first collection of wisdom sayings (e.g. non-eschatological “son of man” sayings) while Q² and Q³ respectively represent the second and the third redaction (e.g. eschatological “son of man” sayings). Using

wisdom vs apocalyptic as a criterion for Q stratification might be questionable (Lührmann 2001:204), but wisdom still remains a dominant topic in Q. From the perspective of wisdom teaching in Q, Jesus is depicted as a “Subversive Sage”. Jesus’ teaching would have subverted four loci of conventional wisdom: family, wealth, honor and religion (Borg 1987:97-124; Kloppenborg 2001:174; Van Aarde 2001).

Exegesis of the "son of man" phrase may lead to the following conclusion: From a linguistic perspective, the phrase "son of man" can be applied to any male human being. In the history of religions "son of man" was exegetically associated (maybe wrongly) with mythological figures characterized by divine attributes such as a preexistent being, or the eschatological judge of the world. Apart from rabbinic sources, the Christian religion is the only tradition where the “son of man” is a historical figure, namely Jesus of Nazareth. This is shown by early Christian evidences such as the Gospel of Mark and Q. Being testimonies of early Christian communities which, after Jesus’ resurrection believed in him as “son of man” and Son of God (true man and true God), both sources portray Jesus as having human and divine features, even though it can be argued that “Jesus as a first-century Israelite from Galilee should be studied like other historical persons and should not be regarded as absolutely unique” (Van Aarde 2001:38). As a matter of fact, in confessing Jesus-Christ as true God and true man, the Nicaea-Constantinople Creed expresses a fundamental aspect of the faith articulated throughout the New Testament writings. By means of the expression *true man* the Creed basically refers to the historical Jesus recognized as a human being or a “son of man”, but not to the so-called pre-existent *Son of man*, which seems to be a mythological reconstruction featured in a great number of modern exegetical writings alongside interpretations from some historians of religions.

3. EXEGETICAL MYTHS ABOUT “SON OF MAN”

Myth is often described as fable, invention or fiction, as opposed to scientific knowledge. It is rather interesting to note that a scientific discipline can also

develop a myth around a subject. By way of illustration the example of a linguistic myth can be quoted, namely “the intrinsic superiority of certain languages over others”. According to Cristal (1987:8), this widespread myth has no basis in linguistic fact. Some languages are of course more useful or prestigious than others, at a given period of history, but this is due to the preeminence of the speakers at that time, and not to any inherent linguistic characteristics.

3.1 Meaning of myth

3.1.1 Content and function

In terms of its content, a myth can be described as “a traditional narrative involving supernatural or imaginary persons and often embodying popular ideas on natural or social phenomena” (Kruger 2001:47-48). It is regarded as a false notion or fictitious person, thing or idea (Kruger 2001:48). With regard to its function, a myth “by narrating a sacred history, stabilizes, and orders, or regenerates and gives meaning to what is seen as the chaos of human, secular and profane, existence” (Kruger 2001:48). It is known that in ancient civilizations, myth used to function as a true story, “a story that is a most precious possession because it is sacred, exemplary, significant” (Van Aarde 2001:49). However, the true nature of a myth as a true story might just be an “emptied reality” or “recycled language”. An emptied reality pertains to the fact that in a mythological context, “everyday experiences are projected into an imaginary world; in other words, reality is emptied” (Barthes 1957:142-143; Van Aarde 2001:49). Myth as a recycled language indicates the fact that it transforms history to nature by stealing language from an ordinary human context then restoring it in a godly context (cf Van Aarde 2001:49).

3.1.2 Myth and metaphor

When a metaphor functions creatively in dealing with transcendental realities, it is likely to fulfill a mythological function, namely a recycled language. As a matter of fact, metaphors function descriptively and creatively (Van der Watt 2000:23).

When they function descriptively, they can describe a reality in a novel way, not previously done. When they function creatively, they can create new realities, which only exist on language level (Van der Watt 2000:23). Realities that exist only on language level are those ones that in mythological language match up with recycled language in the sense that the mythological language is the one taken from human experiences and projected into a godly world. However, Van der Watt (2000:23) points out that by for instance postulating Satan and God as the products of creative power of metaphors, some theories disregard the descriptive aspect of metaphors. According to Van der Watt, descriptive metaphors are of course “ideal for the description of transcendental realities” (Van der Watt 2000:23) as “ordinary words only function analogically and do not cover all the aspects of the heavenly reality fully” (Van der Watt 2000:14). Basically, a metaphorical communication is an open-ended communication, which means an “open communication determined more closely by the context” (Van der Watt 2000:13). Therefore, it is not surprising that religious metaphors develop and flourish in religious contexts. In this perspective, the primary world of reference for a religious metaphor might not necessarily be a “heavenly reality” but a human experience. This human experience is not just projected into a heavenly world, but is already embedded in the heavenly world, maybe through a spiritual quality, which is shared by both the godly and the human worlds. It is interesting to note that a more adequate way of articulating the relationship between the human world and the godly one is still a puzzle which both descriptive and creative metaphors have not yet fully explored.

3.1.3 Myth and fantasy

A myth might incorporate stories of which some are no doubt fact and others fantasy (cf Van Aarde 2001:49). The term fantasy is understood to be referring to an extraordinary or supernatural event. Aichele (1994:85) argues that to a typical contemporary reader of the gospels, Jesus, his words and his deeds, are “fantastic” in the sense of being extraordinary: “When supernatural events or

“Son of man” and exegetical myths

revelations occur in the Gospel stories, they appear as eruptions within the everyday primary world of a secondary world, the world of the marvelous.”

For Aichele (1994:85-86), the miracles, resurrection, and birth stories represent a secondary world constructed in the reader’s imagination from his/her experience of the primary world. The reader believes it to be more real than is the primary world. For the believer, the secondary world of heaven is neither imaginary nor pretended; it is the realm, eternal place of God and of those who love God. It is not fantasy. As a matter of fact, fantasy confuses belief as it occurs when the identity of a character, the explanation of an event, or some future of a story is suspended between the marvelous and the uncanny, having no obvious natural or supernatural explanation. Then the reader is unable to determine the generic identity of the narrative, as well as the reality to which it refers (Aichele 1994:86). In this sense, Aichele interprets the resurrection narrative of Mark (16:1-8) as a fantastic story because of the empty tomb, the young man sitting in the right-hand part, and the fear of the women. But, she regards the story of Jesus’ incarnation in John (1:1-18) as a myth of a supernatural being sent from a heavenly world to the earthly one. For her a story functions as a myth when the reader is to believe it as a true story, whereas a fantastic narrative resists mythic identity and believability. Myth and fantasy are opposites since the latter presents a radical attack on the beliefs entertained by the former (Aichele 1994:92). In addition, fantasy is different from metaphor in the sense that while a metaphor can pretend to use a natural reality in order to tackle a supernatural one, a fantasy has no obvious natural or supernatural explanation. It is just suspended between the marvelous and the supernatural.

An exegetical myth can be understood as an interpretation based on an imaginary belief, which has no factual evidence. Elements of such myth are described here below under a typical exegetical myth of “‘Son of man’ as a messianic title adopted by Jesus or early Church.”

4. "SON OF MAN" AS A MESSIANIC TITLE ADOPTED BY JESUS OR EARLY CHURCH

4.1 "Son of man", the eschatological Messiah

The threefold distinction of "son of man" sayings in terms of earthly activities, passion predictions, and eschatological manifestations is often attributed to Bultmann ([1931] [1948] 1984), although this distinction was already established by Foakes and Lake (1920:368-384) almost a decade earlier. According to Bultmann, the sayings pertaining to the earthly activities of the "son of man" and those pertaining to the predictions of his passion-death-and-resurrection are not authentic. The first ones would have arisen from a misunderstanding of the Greek translation when the Aramaic idiom was rendered as a messianic title. The second group of sayings is likely to be the creation *ex eventu* of the early Christian communities (Bultmann 1984:30). In Bultmann's view, only the eschatological sayings are authentic, as they maintain a difference between Jesus and the coming "son of man" (the eschatological Messiah). For Bultmann therefore, Jesus had not expected the second coming, but the coming of the Messiah, called "son of man", who would act as the judge and the savior. Then later on, early Christian communities have associated the eschatological "son of man" with Jesus and started expecting his second coming (Bultmann 1984:4, 29, 34). These expectations – be they from early Christians or from Jesus – are viewed as being supported by the so-called Jewish expectations of the eschatological and messianic "son of man" (cf Dan 7:13-14; 1 Enoch 46-7). However, in terms of myth dynamics, Bultmannian exegesis attempts to devoid the reality of the early Christian communities' faith in Jesus as Son of God and projects it into the secondary world of a mythical messianic figure by the name of "son of man". This so-called eschatological "son of man" is a recycled language of the phrase "son of man" that Jesus often used to refer to himself.

4.2 "Son of man", the incarnated heavenly man

According to Cullmann (1957:138), Jesus never introduced himself as the Messiah, but used the title "son of man" to openly speak about his messianic

status. He argues that this title expresses two aspects of Jesus’ messianic status: firstly, the aspect of fulfilling at the end of the time the judiciary role of the heavenly man (*Himmelsmensch*); secondly, the aspect of his incarnation in a sinful humanity (Cullmann 1957:155-167; cf Van Aarde 2002:1625-1626). The incarnation of the “son of man” (the heavenly man) in this perspective indicates that the latter is believed to be a supernatural or divine being. It seems contradictory to postulate the incarnation of a heavenly man: before his/her incarnation a heavenly being should by definition be immaterial, therefore not a man; similarly, by existing as a being in blood and flesh a man no longer needs incarnation. In terms of an exegetical myth there is no contradiction, for the reality of faith in the incarnation of Jesus, Son of God has been emptied and restored in a mythic heavenly man by the name of “son of man”.

4.3 “Son of man”: The Christological title portraying Jesus as Son of God

According to Hooker (1967:350), the title “Son of man” is superior to the title of Messiah” because it was “a perfect vehicle for expressing the divine self-consciousness of Jesus while at the same time preserving the secrecy of his self-revelation”. Furthermore, Hooker identifies “son of man” with Son of God when she states that “Jesus, like Israel, can be termed ‘Son of man’ only because his relationship with God is such that he can also be described as ‘Son of God’” (1967:192). Kim (1983) embarks on the same agenda of divinizing the phrase “son of man”. The title of his book *The “Son of Man” as the “Son of God”*, which appeared in the “Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament” Series is self-explanatory. According to Kim (1983:5), “all four gospels identify the Son of man with the Son of God”, although he admits that in the Synoptic Gospels there is no clear statement directly affirming that the “Son of Man is the Son of God”. Nevertheless, Kim finds a clear identification of the “son of man” with the “Son of God” in John 5:26-28. This passage refers to the Father who has life in himself and who has granted the same to the Son, as well as the authority to execute judgment, because he is the “son of man”. For Casey (1995:31-33), Kim has based his interpretation of “son of man” as Son of God on a “loose

association” and on the hypothesis that "son of man" could be a Christological title. Kim’s exegesis forcefully demonstrates how the content of the Christian faith about Jesus, “Son of God”, was recycled and restored in the mythological title "son of man".

5. CONCLUSION

From a common exegesis, "son of man" is understood as an expression used by Jesus to refer to himself as a human being. This is based on the linguistic origin of the expression referring to a human being and on the findings from the history of religions, as well as from the Gospel of Mark and Q. These sources do not provide any clear indication of an existing mythological or divine figure known as the “son of man”. However, coupled with the title “Son of God”, "son of man" in the case of Jesus, serves to indicate his human nature, while "Son of God" points to his divine nature. Nevertheless, exegetical myths are found throughout in New Testament scholarship. As a matter of fact, a number of publications support “son of man” as an existing messianic title adopted by Jesus or the early Christian communities. These exegetical myths recycle the content of the reality of faith in Jesus-Christ as the “Son of God” and restore it in the phrase "son of man". In this process, the phrase "son of man" is christologized or divinized and presented as “the eschatological Messiah”, “the incarnated heavenly man” or “the Christological title portraying Jesus as Son of God”. The combination of the terms "son of man" and “Son of God” to indicate one person, Jesus-Christ, could be regarded at least as a fantasy to the extent of it being the eruption of a supernatural entity, such as the "Son of God", bringing it within the sphere of the marvelous and the uncanny. This being the case, there would be no need to mythologize the phrase "son of man”. As a matter of fact, by mythologizing the phrase "son of man", the Christian faith is merely foiled.

Fortunately, other New Testament scholars have argued against the “exegetical myths” of the phrase "son of man". A recent summary which explains this position very well, can be found in Taylor (1999:152):

“Son of man” and exegetical myths

That “ho huios tou anthrôpou” was not the formal title of an eschatological figure, either in the Gospels (Perrin 1963; 1967; Vermes 1973; 1978; Casey 1979; Lindars 1983) or in the Similitudes of Enoch (Casey 1979:100-102; Nickelburg 1981:215; Collins 1984:112) is now generally recognized. The phrase is clearly circumlocutory

However, after being discarded from some exegetical circles, the so-called eschatological “son of man” is still being re-introduced by others in a more sophisticated way, such as the theory of the development that might have taken place in New Testament times, a development from a small tradition of subversive wisdom to a great apocalyptic tradition in which the disciples used the phrase “son of man” to refer to Jesus as an end time cataclysmic-apocalyptic figure (see Van Aarde 2002:1631):

Ek vind dit meer waarskynlik dat Jesus se gebruik van die uitdrukking “seun van die mens” verstaan behoort te word teen die agtergrond van sy subversiewe wysheid en die “klein tradisie” van kleinboere. Hierdie wysheid kan myns insiens wel as “eskatologies” beskryf word, maar dan nie in die sin van “kataklismiese apokaliptiek” nie ... Jesus se visie kan as sosiaal-etiese apokaliptiek beskryf word ... Sy volgelingen het sy gebruik van die uitdrukking “seun van die mens” as ‘n eretitel in terme van die “groot tradisie” geherinterpreteer en dit dikwels, reeds in die tyd toe die Nuwe Testament geskryf is, aan Jesus in terme van die toekomstig-eindtydelike, kataklismiese apokaliptiek toegeskryf.²

It is interesting to note that this view regarding the “son of man” is very subtle. It avoids referring to “son of man” as a messianic title, but still treats it as a title of subversive wisdom in the little tradition and as a title of honor in the great tradition. Both point to an eschatological messianic figure which fits better in the framework of an exegetical myth. Nevertheless, it is possible to overcome this mythic exegesis if one could argue that the “son of man” phrase refers to the

² “I find that Jesus had more likely used the expression ‘son of man’ in the context of subversive wisdom and that of the little tradition of peasants. Such wisdom can, in my view, be described as ‘eschatological’, but then not in the sense of being ‘cataclysmic apocalyptic figure’... Jesus’ view could be described as socio-ethical apocalypticism ... Jesus’ followers reinterpreted his use of the expression ‘son of man’ as an honorary title in terms of the ‘great tradition’ and already at the time when the New Testament was written, it was often ascribed to Jesus in the sense of the future end-time cataclysmic apocalyptic figure” (paraphrased translation by Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole).

historical Jesus in terms of a human being. This particular human being acted as a prophet or a subversive wisdom, and was even responsible for eschatological hope and apocalyptic fear. He acted in this way, not because he wanted to be identified with the so-called eschatological “son of man”, but just because he was a man who could do so. Why? New Testament writings show in different ways that Jesus is not only man or a son of man, but also the Son of God.

Works consulted

- Aichele, G 1994. Fantasy and myth in the death of Jesus. *Cross Currents* 44(1), 85-96.
- Barthes, R 1957. *Mythologies*. New York: Hill & Wang.
- Bietenhard, H 1982. Der Menschensohn – *ho huios tou anthrôpou*: Sprachliche und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu einem Begriff der synoptischen Evangelien, I in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, II.25.1, 265-350.
- Borg, M.J 1987. *Jesus, a new vision: Spirit, culture, and the life of discipleship*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Borsch, F H 1967. *The Son of Man in myth and history*. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- Bultmann, R [1931]1995. *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Bultmann, R [1948] 1984. *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Tübingen: Mohr.
- Charlesworth, J H 1988. *Jesus within Judaism: New light from exciting archaeology discoveries*. New York: Doubleday. (The Anchor Bible Reference Library.)
- Charlesworth, J H 1985. *The Old Testament pseudepigrapha and the New Testament: Prolegomena for the study of Christian origins*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Society of New Testament Studies Monograph Series 54.)
- Charlesworth, J H 1983. *The Old Testament pseudepigrapha*, I. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.
- Casey, M 1987. General, generic and indefinite: The use of the term “Son of Man” in Aramaic sources and in the teaching of Jesus. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 29, 21-56.
- Casey, M 1991. Method in our madness, and madness in their methods: Some approaches to the Son of Man problem in recent scholarship. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 42, 17-43.
- Casey, M 1994. The use of the term bar (e)nash(a) in the Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 54, 87-118.
- Cristal, D 1987. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

“Son of man” and exegetical myths

- Colpe, C 1967. s v Ho huios tou anthrôpou. *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* 8, 403-487.
- Culmann, O [1954] 1975. *Die Christologie des Neuen Testaments*. Tübingen: Mohr.
- Dunn, J D G 1980. *Christology in the making: A New Testament inquiry into the origins of the doctrine of the incarnation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Eliade, M 1963. *Myth and reality*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Fitzmyer, J.A 1979. Another view of the “Son of Man” debate. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 4, 58-68.
- Foakes J & Lake, F 1992. *The beginnings of Christianity*, I. London: Macmillan.
- Gressmann, H 1929. *Der Messias*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. (*Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments* 43.)
- Gunkel, H 1921. *Schöpfung und Anfänge des Christentums*, II. Stuttgart- Berlin.
- Hooker, M D 1967. *The Son of Man in Mark: A study of the background of the term “Son of Man” and its use in St Mark’s Gospel*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.
- Juel, D H 1992. The origin of Mark’s Christology, in Charlesworth, J M et al (eds), *The Messiah: Developments in earliest Judaism and Christianity*, 449-460. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Kearns, R 1978. *Vorfragen zur Christologie, I: Morphologische und semasiologische Studie zur Vorgeschichte eines christologischen Hoheitstitels*. Tübingen: Mohr.
- Koch, K 1993. Messias und Menschensohn: Die zweistufige Messianologie der jüngeren Apokalyptik. *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 8, 73-102.
- Kümmel, W G 1984. Jesus der Menschensohn, in *Sitzungsberichte der Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft an der J W G-Universität Frankfurt* 20(3), 147-188.
- Kloppenborg, V J S 2001. Discursive practices in the Sayings Gospel Q and the quest of the historical Jesus, in Lindemann, A (ed), *The sayings source Q and the historical Jesus*, 149-190. Leuven: Leuven University Press. (*Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium* 158.)
- Kruger, H A J 2001. Myth, ideology, and wisdom: A brief survey. *Old Testament Essays* 14(1), 47-75.
- Kuzenzama, K P M 1990. *Le titre johannique du Fils de l’homme. Essai lexicographique*. Kinshasa: Facultes Catholiques de Kinshasa. (*Recherches Africaines de Théologie, Travaux de la Faculté de Théologie* 11.)
- Lindars, B 1983. *Jesus Son of Man: A fresh examination of the Son of Man sayings in the gospels in the light of recent research*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

- Lindemann, A (ed) 2001. *The sayings source Q and the historical Jesus*. Leuven: Leuven University Press. (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 158.)
- Loba-Mkole, J-C 1996. Une synthèse d'opinions philologiques sur le Fils de l'homme. *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 22(1), 107-119.
- Loba-Mkole, J-C 2000a. Mark 14:62: Substantial compendium of New Testament christology. *HTS* 56(4), 1119-1945.
- Loba-Mkole, J-C 2000b. The Kiswahili *mwana wa mtu* and the Greek *ho huios tou anthrôpou*, in West, G O & Dube, M W (eds), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, trajectories and trends*, 557-566, Leiden: Brill.
- Meyer, E 1921. *Ursprung and Anfänge des Christentums*, II. Berlin: J G Cotta.
- Nida, E A & Louw, J P 1992. *Lexical semantics of the Greek New Testament*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.
- Lührmann, D 2001. Die Logienquelle und die Leben-Jesu-Forschung, in Lindemann, A (ed). *The sayings source Q and the historical Jesus*, 191-206. Leuven: Leuven University Press. (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 158).
- Mangua, C [1988] 2000. *Son of woman*. Nairobi: Spear Books.
- Meier, J P 1991. *A marginal Jew: Rethinking the historical Jesus* I. New York: Doubleday.
- Mowinckel, S 1954. *He that cometh*. Oxford: Abingdon Press.
- Perrot, C 1979. *Jésus et l'histoire*. Paris: Cerf. (Jésus et Jésus-Christ 11.)
- Piper, R A 2001. Jesus and the conflict of powers in Q: Two Q miracle stories, in Lindemann, A (ed), *The sayings source Q and the historical Jesus*, 317-349. Leuven: Leuven University Press. (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 158.)
- Rowland, C 1985. *Christian origins: An account of the setting and character of the important Messianic sect of Judaism*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.
- Sanders, E P 1993. *The Historical figure of Jesus*. New York: Allen Lane Penguin.
- Schnackenburg, R 1994. *Die Person Jesu Christi im Spiegel der vier Evangelien*. Wien: Herder. (Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, Supplementband 4.)
- Schürmann, H 1975. Beobachtungen zum Menschensohn-Titel in der Redequelle. Sein Vorkommen in Abschluss- und Einleitungswendungen, in Pesch, R & Schnackenburg, R (eds), *Jesus und der Menschensohn: Festschrift für A Vögtle*, 124-147. Wien: Herder.
- Svedlund, G 1974. *Aramaic portions of the Pesiqta de Rab Kahana*. Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell.

“Son of man” and exegetical myths

- Telford, W R 1999. *The theology of the Gospel of Mark*. New York: Cambridge University Press. (New Testament Theology.)
- Tuckett, C M 1993. The Son of man in Q, in De Boer M C (ed), *From Jesus to John: Essays on Jesus and New Testament Christology in honour of Marinus de Jonge*, 196-215. Sheffield: Sheffield University Press. (Journal of the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series 84.)
- Tuckett, C M 2001. The Son of man and Daniel 7: Q and Jesus, in Lindemann, A (ed), *The Sayings Source Q and the Historical Jesus*, 371-394. Leuven: Leuven University Press. (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 158.)
- Vaage, L E 1991. The Son of Man sayings in Q: Stratigraphical location and significance. *Semeia* 55, 103-129.
- Van Aarde, A 2001. *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus as Child of God*. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International.
- Van Aarde, A 2002. Die uitdrukking “seun van die mens” in die Jesus-tradisie: ’n Ontwikkeling vanaf ’n landbou-omgewing na die wêreld van skrifgeleerdes. *HTS* 58(4), 1625-1653.
- Van den Heever, G & Scheffler, E 2001. *From Jesus Christ to Christianity: Early Christian literature in context*. Pretoria: University of South Africa Press.
- Vermes, G 1967. The use of *bar nash/bar nasha* in Jewish Aramaic, in Black, M (ed), *An Aramaic approach to the Gospels and Acts*, 310-328. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vermes, G 1983. *Jesus and the world of Judaism*. London: Student Christian Movement Press.
- Vermes, G 1983. 1993. *The religion of Jesus the Jew*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Von Gall, A F 1926. *Basileia tou Theou: Eine religionsgeschichtliche Studie zur vorkirchlichen Eschatologie*. Heidelberg: Winter.
- Zeitlin, I 1988. *Jesus and the Judaism of his time*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.