



Gospel Portraits of Jesus: A Lenten Study

SESSION 5

Son of David and Son of God are names for Jesus given by a variety of persons, whereas Son of Man is a name that Jesus appropriated for himself.

Introduction

In this session we are going to focus primarily on three names of Jesus: *Son of David*, *Son of Man*, and *Son of God*. It is worth noting, however, that there are six other ways the word *Son* is used to refer to Jesus in the Gospels. In Mark, Jesus is identified as *son of Mary* (6:3), *Son of the Most High God* (5:7), and *Son of the Blessed One* (14:61), and in Matthew, *Son of the living God* (16:16). In Luke, Jesus is called *son of Joseph* (3:24) and *Son of the Most High* (1:32). And, in John, Jesus is also called *son of Joseph* (1:45; 6:42).

To be called “son of Mary” (Mark 6:3) is quite unusual, since persons were ordinarily identified in relationship to their father. In Mark’s narrative, Jesus was in his hometown, Nazareth, where the people knew him as one of their community, a carpenter and son of Mary. They refused to recognize him as one with special authority and powers.

Luke begins his genealogy of Jesus where he is identified as “the son (as was thought) of Joseph” (3:23). The genealogy traces Jesus through the father’s ancestry back to Adam, but there is a parenthetical phrase “as was thought” to suggest that Jesus is more than the son of Joseph. All of the uses of the word “Son” regarding Jesus are intended to identify him in relationship to God, to his parents, and to the human family.

Son of David

Son of David is a messianic name and appears in sixteen verses in the Gospels, but not once in John. We noticed



Son of Man is the title or name that Jesus used exclusively to speak of himself.

in the previous session that Jesus as Messiah had its roots in the prophets who proclaimed God would bring forth a Messiah in the tradition of David. “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king . . .” (Jer. 23:5a). The corporate memory of the people was of a time when the kingdom of Israel was politically powerful during the reign of King David. Prompted by the promises of the prophets, they hoped for a day when a new king would reign on the throne of David.

Six of the “Son of David” references in Matthew, Mark, and Luke are where Jesus healed blind men. Each passage reports a healing by Jesus that occurred after leaving Jericho on the way to Jerusalem for entry into the city at the beginning of Jesus’ last week. Though the three passages are seen as parallel, there are differences between them. In Matthew 20:29–34 there are two blind men. Mark 10:46–52 describes one blind man, “Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, . . . sitting by the roadside” (v. 46). And, in Luke 18:35–43 we read,

“As he approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging” (v. 35). In each account the blind men call out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy.” Jesus asks what they want him to do, and they ask for their sight to be restored. In Matthew, Jesus is “moved with compassion” and heals the two men, whereas in the other two accounts Jesus perceives the man’s faith and restores his sight. All three passages show Jesus’ compassion for and response to the needs of persons, even those on the margin of society who are degraded and disregarded by others.

Two of the references to “Son of David” are in genealogies of Matthew (1:1) and Luke (3:31). In addition to blind men calling Jesus “Son of David” there were others: crowds (Matt. 12:23), a Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:22), the crowds during Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:9), and children in the Temple (Matt. 21:15).

Son of Man in the Old Testament

In order to begin our understanding of the Son of Man we need to return again to the Old Testament. Three of the books in which the term “son of man” appears are Psalms, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

Psalms 8:4 in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) reads, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” There is a footnote at the word “mortals” that reads “son of man.” The concept may be clearer in the King James Version, “What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?” Son of man, mortals, human beings are endowed by God with a surprising, amazing place in the order of God’s creation, as the text continues, “Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor” (Ps. 8:5). To be blessed with such an honored, close relationship with God is truly an undeserved gift by the grace of a loving, merciful God.

The book of Daniel is the only apocalyptic book in the Old Testament composed of a series of visions experienced by Ezekiel. Chapter 7 begins the second half of the book with a vision of four beasts that represent four world empires threatening Israel (Babylonians, Medes, Persians, and Greeks). These empires will be defeated by the One sent from God. “I saw one like a human

being coming with the clouds of heaven. . . . To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him” (Dan. 7:13–14). In this passage in the NRSV there is also a footnote at the phrase “one like a human being” with a note that reads, “one like a son of man.”

In Ezekiel, the prophet is addressed by God as “O mortal” more than eighty times. The first instance of this word from God to the prophet is, “He said to me, O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you” (2:1). Again, in the NRSV, there is a footnote at the word “mortal” that reads, “son of man.”

Son of Man in the Gospels

The above Old Testament expressions of the “son of man” serve as a backdrop for Jesus and the Gospel writers. Son of Man is the title or name that Jesus used exclusively to speak of himself. Of the seventy-eight appearances in the four Gospels of “Son of Man,” all but two are attributed to Jesus speaking about himself. The exceptions are John 12:34 where the crowd is speaking to Jesus, “How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?”

Since we cannot deal with all of the Son of Man references we will focus on Luke’s Gospel and its twenty-five citations. The uses of Son of Man may be seen generally in three categories: Jesus speaking about himself directly, Jesus speaking about his suffering and death, and Jesus speaking about future times.

Three examples of Jesus’ self-identification: “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man” (Luke 6:22). “Jesus said to them, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head’” (9:58). And “For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost” (19:10). In each instance Jesus could have said, “on account of me,” or “I have nowhere to lay my head,” or “I came to seek out and save the lost.” About a third of the Son of Man references in Luke are similar to this.

A couple examples of Jesus speaking about his own suffering and imminent death include “Let these words sink into your ears: the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands” (9:44) and “the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and

on the third day rise again" (24:7). In these two examples as well as the others, Jesus could have referred to himself in the first person.

Almost half of the Son of Man statements made by Jesus are in reference to what will come to pass in God's future. Several examples are: "You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour" (12:40), "They will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory" (21:27), and "But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God" (22:69).

To summarize—Jesus appropriated a familiar image from the Hebrew Scriptures as a way of speaking of himself. His hearers, and the readers of the Gospels at a later time, would understand the connection to Psalms, Daniel, and Ezekiel and would believe in Jesus as *the* representative human being endowed by God with full power and authority of the Almighty. In the person of Jesus we encounter the One expected to be the God-sent deliverer and the One who reveals the essential nature of humanity, the Son of Man.

Son of God

Compared to Son of Man (78) there are many fewer verses (21) in the Gospels that present Jesus as the Son of God. In addition to the name, Son of God, there is the concept in the Gospels of the Beloved Son of God, the Father. We can trace the writers' understandings of the special relationship between Jesus the Son and God the Father from the beginning to the end of the Gospel narratives.

Mark's Gospel opens, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1). At the time of the annunciation, the angel of the Lord said to Mary, "the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God" (Luke 1:35b). When Jesus was twelve years old he went with his family to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. After the festival Jesus remained in the Temple with the teachers of the Law. When his parents discovered he was missing they returned to find him with the teachers. His mother said, "Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." Jesus replied, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:48–49).

Matthew, Mark, and Luke include the narratives of Jesus' baptism by John followed immediately with his tempta-



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tion in the wilderness. In his baptism, the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus like a dove and a voice was heard from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11, see also Matt. 3:17, Luke 3:22). After his baptism, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness tempted three times by Satan. In Matthew, the first two temptations begin with, "If you are the Son of God" (Matt. 4:3, 6), whereas in Luke's narrative the first and third temptations begin with those same words (4:3, 9). The contrast between the narratives of baptism and temptation is striking. Jesus is confirmed as the Beloved Son and immediately thereafter is tempted to doubt his special relationship with God.

In Matthew's narrative Jesus' question to the twelve, "Who do you say that I am?" elicits a response from Peter, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" (16:16). The narrative of the transfiguration follows quickly after in Matthew (17:1–13), Mark (9:2–8), and Luke (9:28–36). In each Gospel three disciples accompany Jesus to a mountain to pray. Suddenly, while praying, Jesus "was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him" (Matt. 17:2–3). Peter suggests they build three dwellings, one for each of them. Then came a cloud and out of the cloud a voice was heard saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased" (17:5).

In Jesus' trial before the high priest in Jerusalem each Gospel presents the event a little differently. In Matthew, the high priest demands of Jesus, "tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God" (26:63); in Mark he is asked, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"

(14:61), and in Luke the question is, "Are you, then, the Son of God?" (22:70). Jesus' answer in Matthew and Luke is, "You have said so" or "You say that I am" whereas in Mark he gives a direct answer, "I am." This is one of just two occasions where Jesus affirms his identity, the other being in his encounter with the woman of Samaria at the well when he identified himself as the Messiah.

In the Gospel of John the term "Son of God" appears several times. In the encounter between the disciple Nathaniel and Jesus, Nathaniel says, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (1:49). Later in the conversation Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man. This brief passage has three of the names for Jesus we have explored. "King of Israel" is closely related to Jesus as the Son of David. When Lazarus was believed by his sister to be dead, Martha confronted Jesus, wishing that he had come sooner so her brother would not have died. Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life," and asked Martha if she believed this. She replied, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (11:27).

Unique to John are thirty-eight verses where Jesus spoke of "my Father," which shows the intimate relationship between Jesus and his heavenly Father. Jesus speaks of doing the "works of my Father" (10:37); "If you know me, you will know my Father also" (14:7); his prayer for his disciples, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you" (17:1); and in his resurrection appearance to Mary, "Go to my brothers

and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (20:17).

Perhaps the most familiar verse in John's entire Gospel is, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (3:16). This verse reinforces the image of the relationship of the Father to the Son, and for many Christians serves as a cornerstone of their faith.

Conclusion

Our journey in Lent brings us closer to Holy Week. Son of David, Son of Man, and Son of God are names for Jesus that lead us to greater understanding of the essence of his incarnation and his mission. He is seen as the One from God who would reestablish the reign of God as Son of David. Jesus claims for himself to be the Son of Man. As a result of his mighty works and great wisdom he is perceived as the Son of God, and he sees himself in a very special relationship to God the Father.

About the Writer

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DAILY BIBLE READINGS

After reading the assigned passage for each day, spend some time reflecting on the question related to the passage and praying or meditating on the passage. Select a verse or a phrase to repeat slowly, prayerfully over and over, or write the passage down and then continue with your own words of reflection and prayer.

Sunday: Psalm 8:1–9

In what ways do you see yourself and others created “a little lower than God”?

Monday: Matthew 3:13–4:11

How are you tempted to depart from the ministry to which you have been called?

Tuesday: Mark 10:46–52

Who are the marginalized of our society that need compassion and healing?

Wednesday: Matthew 17:1–13

What are some visions you have for how Jesus may be present in our world?

Thursday: Luke 22:63–23:5

What does it mean to you that Jesus is Messiah, Son of Man and Son of God?

Friday: John 17:1–26

Imagine that Jesus is praying this prayer for you.

Saturday: John 3:1–16

What does this familiar passage mean to you, especially verse 16?