

6.28.09 / Mark 2:1-12**Son of Man**

The phrase “son of man” appears quite frequently in the Bible. It’s primary meaning is a slightly poetic way to say “human”.

“God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind.” (Numbers 23:19)

“That he would argue the case of a man with God, as a son of man does with his neighbor.” (Job 16:21)

“What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” (Psalm 8:4)

“I, I am he who comforts you; who are you that you are afraid of man who dies, of the son of man who is made like grass” (Isaiah 51:12)

“As when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighboring cities, declares the LORD, so no man shall dwell there, and no son of man shall sojourn in her.” (Jeremiah 50:40)

The book of Ezekiel alone contains 93 instances of this phrase, all of them directed at Ezekiel by God. Here it seems that “son of man” means, roughly, “mere mortal”.

This may also be the context of Daniel 7:13-14, but it is uncertain and often debated:

“I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
And 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 one
that shall not be destroyed.”

Many of the figures in preceding visions have been monstrous creatures, and so “son of man” may simply be telling us that, finally, here is a figure who is a human (Daniel himself is called “son of man” in 8:17). However, because this character is both an important prophetic figure and otherwise unnamed “son of man” becomes a shorthand for this person.

So, when Jesus calls himself the Son of Man, what does it mean? Most likely, he is claiming the role of the figure in Daniel, saying that he is the one to whom God has given, or will give, dominion and authority. Given the context of his ministry such a claim would be seen as confirming that he was the Messiah.

Whether this claim also specifically addresses Jesus' humanity is less clear. There simply seems to be no question, in the Gospels, that Jesus was a human. His disciples ate with him, drank with him, watched him get tired and fall asleep, and so on. It's only later, as Jesus' Godhood really sinks in, that people begin to have trouble with his humanity. Perhaps this title was chosen to help people deal with that, and perhaps that's too silly a mistake to require that kind of response.