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GLIMPSES OF JESUS THROUGH
THE JOHANNINE LENS

Edited by

Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, S.J., and Tom Thatcher



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THE JOHANNINE SON OF MAN AND THE HISTORICAL JESUS: JOHN 9:35 AS A TEST CASE*

Benjamin E. Reynolds

What does the Johannine Son of Man have to do with the historical Jesus? In modern critical scholarship, the answer is: Absolutely nothing. The sentiment of the majority of scholars can still be summed up in the statement of Ernst Käsemann (1964, 32): “We must admit that nowhere in the New Testament is the life story of Jesus so emptied of all real content as it already is here [in the Gospel of John], where it seems to be almost a projection of the present back into the past.” Normally, when John’s Gospel is allowed at all as a source for authentic words and actions of the historical Jesus, it is merely to “supplement or corroborate the testimony of the Synoptic tradition” (Dunn 2003, 167; see Dodd 1963, 315–420). Consequently, the Johannine Son of Man sayings are generally understood to be rewritten or theologized versions of the Synoptic Son of Man sayings. A few scholars have included the Johannine Son of Man sayings in their attempts to answer questions around the Son of Man debate, but even these scholars have often expressed negative views on the relationship between the Jesus of history and Jesus as the Son of Man in John. For example, Angus J. B. Higgins (1964, 185) states that the Fourth Gospel “makes no positive contribution to the problem of Jesus and the Son of man” (see also Smalley 1969, 300–301; discussion in Ensor 2006, 14–15).

Considering the state of the question, then, it may seem futile to explore the possible authenticity of any of the Johannine Son of Man sayings. The present essay, however, will present a case for reconsidering the Johannine Son of Man sayings in the context of the larger Son of Man debate. Over forty years ago, William O. Walker (1969, 54) challenged

* An earlier version of this article was published in Reynolds 2011.

scholars to reinvestigate “the value of the Fourth Gospel as a historical source.” His challenge remains relevant to the present discussion, since the Johannine Son of Man sayings are all too often categorically disregarded simply because they are found in the Gospel of John. As will be argued in this essay, the Johannine Son of Man sayings should be considered in the debate over Jesus’s possible use of this term, because they cohere in a broad sense with similar sayings in the Synoptic Gospels and are at the same time discontinuous with much of early Christianity. John 9:35 will be examined here as a test case using the criteria of dissimilarity and coherence. As will be seen, this approach raises intriguing possibilities regarding the authenticity of this Son of Man saying in John’s Gospel.

“The Son of Man” in Early Christianity

Although the Son of Man problem has not been answered in a way that has achieved consensus (see Burkett 2000, 124), most scholars agree that Jesus uttered the phrase “the Son of Man.” Maurice Casey (1991, 46–47) points to the presence of the phrase in all the Gospel traditions and its absence from the New Testament epistles and early Christian confessional statements. The Gospel of John shares a number of general similarities with Matthew, Mark, and Luke in the way that the idiom is presented: Jesus is the only one who uses the phrase “the Son of Man” (cf. Luke 24:7; John 12:34); Jesus uses this phrase specifically of himself; the Gospels portray the phrase with a titular sense, although the historicity of this sense on the lips of Jesus is debated (Burkett 2000, 82–96); finally here, when Jesus uses the phrase, it is often in the context of comments on the significance of his life, death, and resurrection. On these four points, John’s Gospel shares a general framework with the Synoptic Gospels in the use of the idiom, a use that is not uniform across early Christianity.

Outside the four Gospels, no consistency in the use of the idiom is evident. Stephen’s declaration in Acts 7:56 is the only reference to Jesus with the articular “*the* Son of Man” outside the Gospels. Although Jesus is not the speaker of the articular phrase in Acts 7:56, the context of Jesus’s saying resembles the Lukan version of Jesus’s Sanhedrin trial (Luke 22:69; see Lindars 1984, 139–41). In Revelation (1:13; 14:14), the phrase lacks the articles and is a direct reference to the “one like a son of man” from Dan 7:13–14 (see Rev 1:7). Likewise, Heb 2:6 uses the anarthrous phrase in a citation of Ps 8. Outside these instances, the idiom is absent from the rest of the New Testament, including Paul’s letters and the Johannine epistles.

Similarly, in early Christian literature outside the New Testament, the idiom “the Son of Man” is rare, and when it is employed the meaning reveals further inconsistency with the idiom’s use in the Gospels. The primary referent of the idiom in early Christian writings is to Jesus’s humanity, not necessarily to Jesus himself: “Son of Man” is often used in tandem with “Son of God” to highlight Jesus’s human nature in contrast with his divine nature. In addition, the designation no longer has a titular sense and does not specifically refer to Jesus’s life and passion (see Barn. 12.10; Ignatius, *Eph.* 20.2; Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 100; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.10.2; 16.3, 7; 18.3–4; 19.1–2; 22.1). Two apocryphal gospels include “Son of Man” sayings, but it is less clear that these uses are references to Jesus. The Gospel of Thomas 86 repeats the Q saying about the Son of Man having no place to lay his head (Matt 8:20 // Luke 9:58), but considering that logia 83–85 and 87 imply references to humanity, it may be argued that logion 86 should also be understood as a general reference to humanity and not necessarily to Jesus specifically (Doran 1991, 210–19). The Gospel of Mary records that the resurrected Jesus told his disciples that the Son of Man is within them (8.18). After Jesus’s departure, the disciples ask how they are to preach “the gospel of the kingdom of the Son of Man” (9.9–10). But Mary’s emphasis on becoming a human being (9.28) and putting on the perfect man (18.16) suggests that the references to Son of Man here are indications of the need to achieve this perfected humanity (Tuckett 2007, 154–55). Another gnostic text, the Treatise on Resurrection, presents “Son of Man” as Jesus’s humanity in contrast to “Son of God,” as in the apostolic fathers (44.21–29). However, the treatise speaks of belief that the Son of Man rose from the dead (46.14–15). Although this may suggest some sort of confessional statement regarding the Son of Man, the content of the belief and of the treatise is resurrection. It is more likely, as Douglas Hare (1990, 39) states, “that ‘Son of Man’ functions here as a way of referring to the incarnate state of the Son of God; the restoration of human souls to the Pleroma for this author requires incarnation, not simply a docetic revealer” (see also Thomassen and Meyer 2007, 49–51; Peel 2001, 2.151–52).¹

1. Two early Christian texts seem to use the Son of Man idiom in a way similar to its usage in the canonical Gospels, but both texts seem to have been directly influenced by their canonical counterparts. The Gospel of the Hebrews echoes the Son of Man sayings in the eucharistic sayings (Mark 14:21; Matt 26:24; Luke 22:22; see Hare 1990, 41). Similarly, Hegesippus’s account of the martyrdom of James relies heavily

In sum, the Johannine Son of Man sayings reveal coherence with the synoptic Son of Man sayings, while at the same time being discontinuous with the rest of the New Testament writings and much of early Christianity. Hare (1990,44) states that “none of the early Christian writings uses the term ‘the Son of Man’ kerygmatically. It is never used in a confession of faith or vocatively in a prayer addressed to Jesus.” Thus, it would seem remiss for a study of the historicity of the Son of Man sayings to neglect the Johannine sayings.

The Johannine Son of Man and Questions of Authenticity

Jesus’s Son of Man saying in John 9:35 provides an interesting opportunity to ask historical questions about the Johannine understanding of the idiom. In 9:35, Jesus asks the man born blind, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” Apart from historical questions, the saying and its context raise a number of interpretive problems. Is “Son of Man” a circumlocution here (“Do you believe in *me*?”), or does it carry a titular force (“Do you believe in the figure who holds the title ‘the Son of Man?’”)? It seems more exegetically sound to understand the idiom in 9:35 in the latter sense (titular), because Jesus subsequently responds to the man’s question, “Who is he?” by saying, “the one speaking with you is *that one*” (Leivestad 1972, 251; Barrett 1978, 364; see M. Müller 1991).

Perhaps because of the obvious christological focus of the context, scholars have not seriously considered the possible authenticity of John 9:35. At the same time, the criterion of dissimilarity may serve as a helpful tool for approaching the question. This criterion would suggest that sayings of Jesus that are dissimilar from his Jewish context and from early Christianity are least likely to be inauthentic. The criterion of dissimilarity has often been critiqued for disregarding possibly authentic sayings of Jesus that were continuous with early Christianity and with the Judaism of Jesus’s day. At the same time, this criterion is still considered a beneficial methodological tool when applied positively (Ensor 1996, 44; also W. Walker 1969, 48; Hooker 1970–1971, 486; see also Meier 1991, 171–74).

With regard to John 9:35, Hare (1990, 106) and Casey (2007, 306) have observed that there is nothing like this confessional statement in the early

upon the accounts of Stephen’s martyrdom in Acts 7 and Jesus’s Son of Man saying before the Sanhedrin (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.23).

church. In the New Testament, the Pauline confession of faith is “Jesus Christ is Lord” (Rom 10:9), and, as noted earlier, there is no mention of δ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου outside the Gospels and Acts 7:56 (see Heb 2:6; Rev 1:13; 14:14). Also as noted earlier, in early Christianity the designation refers more specifically to Jesus’s humanity *in contrast to* his divinity. While some scholars contend that John also uses the Son of Man to refer to the humanity of Jesus (e.g., Ruckstuhl 1972, 276; Pamment 1985, 64–65; see Moloney 1978, 213; 2005, 200–203; 2013, 275, 284 n. 56), I have argued elsewhere that δ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου functions as a heavenly title in John’s Gospel (Reynolds 2008a, esp. 214–25). In the specific case of John 9:35, it seems unlikely that the blind man, who moves from understanding Jesus as a healer (9:11), a prophet (9:17), and finally as one “from God” (9:33), would then confess and worship Jesus as “the human one” (9:35–38). Throughout John 9, it is Jesus’s opponents who refer to him as a human being (9:16, 24). In this context, the confession of faith in the Son of Man is not a reference to Jesus’s humanity, as is the case elsewhere in early Christianity (see further Reynolds 2008a, 173–89).

The closest Jewish texts to the Son of Man saying in John 9:35 are 1 En. 62–63 and Dan 7:13–14 (see also Rev 1:13–17). In the latter text, a figure “like a son of man” approaches the Ancient of Days and is given dominion, glory, and a kingdom. This dominion is eternal dominion, and all peoples and nations serve this “one like a son of man.” There are some similarities with John 9:35–38 regarding the service given to the Danielic figure and the way the man born blind worships Jesus. This connection is heightened in the Old Greek version of Dan 7:14 (see Reynolds 2008b, 75–76). In 1 En. 62–63, the Enochic son of man is worshipped by the kings of the earth as they petition him for mercy (62.9). This text presents a closer connection with the worship of Jesus by the blind man (John 9:38), but again there is no confession of faith in the son of man figure on the part of the kings of the earth. Jesus’s question to the man born blind thus appears discontinuous with Second Temple Judaism as well as early Christianity.

Strikingly, the confession of belief in John 9:35 is also discontinuous with other confessions of belief in John’s Gospel. John’s Gospel emphasizes the belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (20:30–31); Jesus’s identity as “the Son of Man” is not the focus of Johannine Christology (4:26; 11:27; also 7:31, 41; 10:24). The textual tradition of John 9:35 also witnesses to the discontinuity in the confession of Jesus as Son of Man with the Johannine confession of Jesus as Son of God. Some early manuscripts of the Fourth Gospel suggest that scribes replaced δ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου with

ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ in Jesus's question, a reading that reflects the understanding that the Son of Man was not commonly understood in confessions of faith.

How then did this saying make its way into John 9:35 when there is no evidence elsewhere in the New Testament, early Christianity, or Second Temple Judaism for a confession of this sort? Does the discontinuity suggest that the historical Jesus spoke the confession of faith in John 9:35 or something like it? Before reaching a conclusion, a comparison with two Son of Man sayings in Luke may be helpful.

Although there is no direct parallel in the Synoptic Gospels with John 9:35, and thus no multiple attestation for the saying, two Son of Man sayings in Luke reveal some thematic similarity with Jesus's question to the man born blind. In Luke 12:8, Jesus declares: "Amen, I say to you, whoever confesses me before human beings, also the Son of Man will confess that person before the angels of God." Although the Greek verbs in Luke 12:8 and John 9:35 are different (*ὁμολογήσει* and *πιστεύεις*, respectively), there is a loose conceptual similarity between them. Interestingly, in both cases the verb is followed by a preposition (*ὁμολογήσει ἐν* and *πιστεύεις εἰς*), a feature of Luke 12:8 that Casey (2007, 179) considers an Aramaism. In addition, the confession in Luke resembles a courtroom confession (Stuhlmacher 2005, 123), and Luke 12:11 mentions being brought before the rulers and authorities. Similarly, in John 9:35, the man born blind has just been thrown out from before the rulers after confessing that Jesus is from God (9:24–34). Thus, while Luke 12:8 and John 9:35 are obviously different sayings, broad thematic and contextual similarities are perceptible.

Further resemblances between Luke 18:8 and John 9:35 can be detected. In Luke, Jesus asks, "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" The content of such "faith" is not clarified; throughout Luke's Gospel, *πίστις* tends to refer to faith in Jesus as a healer (7:9; 8:48; 17:19; see also 5:20). The immediate context of Luke 18:8 suggests that the faith the Son of Man hopes to find is a faith in God's justice. Thus, the content of faith in Luke 18:8 and John 9:35 are different, but Luke 18:8 reveals a noteworthy link between the Son of Man and belief in the Synoptic Gospels.

Overall, the confession of faith in the Son of Man in John 9:35 reveals discontinuity with early Christianity and Second Temple Judaism and is even dissimilar to other confessional statements in the Gospel of John. Although there is no indication of multiple attestation between John 9:35 and Luke 12:8; 18:8, the thematic overlaps suggest that the Son of Man saying in 9:35 shares parallel concepts with the Lukan tradition, if not the

Synoptic tradition as a whole (see Mark 8:38; Matt 10:32). Following the criterion of dissimilarity, one may argue that this confessional question may have come from Jesus himself, since it does not appear to have come from early Christianity or Jesus's Jewish milieu. At the very least, the evidence reveals the difficulty in disproving that this confession of faith in the Son of Man came from the lips of the historical Jesus.

John and the Synoptics on the Son of Man

The observations on John 9:35 outlined above call for an examination of the remaining Johannine Son of Man sayings in comparison with the portrayals of the Son of Man in the Synoptics. The Johannine Son of Man sayings have been approached in various ways, including attempts to understand them within synoptic categories: earthly sayings, passion sayings, and coming sayings (Ham 1998, 76–78). This approach, however, has proven to be impractical, since the individual Son of Man sayings do not fit neatly into these categories and because the categories themselves are not as precise as is commonly argued (Hooker 1967, 80; Gathercole 2004, 366). Higgins (1964, 157) places the Johannine Son of Man sayings into two groups: “sayings of synoptic type” and “sayings of non-synoptic type.” While Higgins's model is problematic at several points (e.g., some sayings do not fit neatly into either of his two categories, and some of the “sayings of non-synoptic type” he identifies reflect synoptic themes), I will follow it broadly here to briefly review the most distinctive Johannine Son of Man sayings and then those most similar to the Synoptic sayings. Space permits only preliminary observations.

John 3:13 and 6:62 are unlike the Son of Man sayings in the Synoptic Gospels. The Johannine Son of Man is here depicted as a preexistent, heavenly figure who descends from heaven (3:13) and ascends to where he was before (6:62; Ashton 2007, 240; also, see Moloney 2005, 192). Compared to the Synoptic Gospels, the Johannine figure is presented on a grander scale as the one who connects heaven and earth and reveals heavenly things. This portrayal is unique to John, but any discussion of authenticity for these sayings would need to compare their continuity with early Christian Christology in the heavenly ascension of Jesus with the use of the Son of Man idiom in this context.

The Son of Man sayings in 6:27 and 6:53 highlight the Johannine Son of Man's role in salvation. In 6:27, the Son of Man gives “food that remains to eternal life,” which is Jesus himself (6:32–35). The salvific role of the

Son of Man has some parallel to the Synoptic Son of Man giving his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45) and coming to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). In all three sayings, the Son of Man has come (see John 6:35, “from heaven”), and the result of his coming is salvation. A further connection exists with Mark 10:45 in that what the Son of Man “gives” is himself. John 6:53 shares the theme of salvation with the Son of Man sayings mentioned above. The eating of the Son of Man’s flesh and the drinking of his blood is again similar to the Son of Man’s giving himself for salvation. While the imagery reflects eucharistic language, the Johannine use is primarily a metaphor for belief (Dunn 1970–1971, 333). However, it is worth noting the references to Jesus as the Son of Man in eucharistic contexts in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 14:21 // Matt 26:24 // Luke 22:22). The Johannine saying is distinctive, but the theme of salvation and the eucharistic-like language do not move the saying outside the parameters of the Gospel tradition.

“Glory” is a characteristic of the Son of Man in all four Gospels (see also 1 En. 48.5; 2 Bar 30.1). Each of the Synoptic Gospels speaks of the Son of Man “coming in glory” (Mark 8:38; 13:26; and par.). In Luke, the glory is specifically declared to be the Son of Man’s glory (9:26), and in Matthew, the Son of Man will sit on “his throne of glory” (19:28; 25:31). In John’s Gospel, by contrast, the Son of Man is already glorified (12:23; 13:31–32), and this glorification does not take place at a future coming but rather at his “hour,” which seems to include Jesus’s crucifixion, resurrection, and return to the Father (2:22; 12:16; Blank 1964, 267; Brown 1966–1970, 2:606). The theme of glory highlights the thematic similarity between the Johannine Son of Man and the portrayals of the Son of Man in the Synoptic Gospels, but differences persist in the details, particularly with regard to the timing of the glory. While Jesus may have described the Son of Man as a glorious figure, the differences between the Johannine and Synoptic sayings make it difficult to ascertain the authenticity of the Johannine sayings.

In John 5:27, the authority to judge is bound to Jesus’s role as Son of Man. In a thematically similar manner, the Matthean Son of Man sits in judgment on his throne of glory (Matt 19:28; 25:31). Although the Johannine saying and its context do not refer to thrones or glory, the Son of Man has authority to exercise judgment in both passages. Further, both passages depict the Son of Man’s role in the separation of the righteous and the wicked (Matt 25:46; John 5:28–29) and locate this separation at an end time judgment (see Dodd 1963, 407). Matthew 25:31 and John 5:27 are not the

same saying, but the theme of judgment is portrayed by both as an important feature of the Son of Man, which may or may not suggest the possibility of authenticity behind the Johannine saying (see Martyn 2003, 133).

The first Son of Man saying in John resembles the final Son of Man saying in Mark and especially Matthew. All three sayings include the word $\delta\psi\epsilon\sigma\theta\epsilon$ (“you will see”), but there is greater lexical overlap with Matthew 26:64.

Matthew 26:64: $\pi\lambda\eta\nu\ \lambda\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\omega\ \acute{\upsilon}\mu\acute{\iota}\nu\ \acute{\alpha}\pi\prime\ \acute{\alpha}\rho\tau\iota\ \delta\psi\epsilon\sigma\theta\epsilon$

John 1:51: $\acute{\alpha}\mu\eta\nu\ \acute{\alpha}\mu\eta\nu\ \lambda\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\omega\ \acute{\upsilon}\mu\acute{\iota}\nu\ \delta\psi\epsilon\sigma\theta\epsilon$

The similarity is heightened in a textual variant on John 1:51, which adds $\acute{\alpha}\pi\prime\ \acute{\alpha}\rho\tau\iota$ before $\delta\psi\epsilon\sigma\theta\epsilon$. Casey (2007, 278, 312) claims that John 1:51 is therefore a rewritten version of Matthew’s Sanhedrin saying. If this is the case, the placement of the saying at the beginning of John’s Gospel is consistent with the present eschatological work of the Johannine Son of Man, but the different audience (disciples versus the Sanhedrin) and context of the saying (the Son of Man as a ladder connecting heaven and earth versus the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven) may give reason to examine the saying more closely.

Finally, the three Johannine “lifted up” sayings (3:14; 8:28; 12:32) share similarities with the three passion predictions of the Markan tradition (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33). Each of the four Gospels makes three predictions of Jesus’s death and resurrection. Further, the word $\delta\epsilon\acute{\iota}$ (“it is necessary”) introduces the first of the three sayings in all four Gospels (Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22; John 3:14; see also Matt 16:21; John 12:32). Also in each, Jesus uses the phrase to speak of his passion.

While these similarities exist between the Johannine lifting up sayings and the Markan passion predictions, there are also clear differences between John and the Synoptic Gospels. First, the contexts of the sayings are different: in Mark, Jesus speaks these three sayings to his disciples; in John, the first saying is spoken to Nicodemus, the second to the Jews, and the third to the crowd. Second, John’s Jesus does not speak of suffering, death, and rising on the third day, but of being “lifted up,” which may be understood as a theologizing of the synoptic predictions in light of Isa 52:13. At the least, John’s Gospel witnesses to Jesus making three statements about his death using the phrase “the Son of Man.” Whether the Johannine “lifted up” sayings offer a separate historical witness is a question that cannot be pursued here (see Létourneau 1992).

Conclusion

The Son of Man saying in John 9:35 offers a possible place where the Johannine Son of Man and the historical Jesus may meet. Jesus's question, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" is discontinuous with early Christianity, Second Temple Judaism, and other confessional statements in John. It has links with the themes of confession and faith in relation to the Son of Man in Luke 12:8; 18:8. This evidence suggests that it is possible that Jesus spoke the saying in John 9:35 or something like it. The authenticity of the saying cannot be entirely proven, but neither can it be disproven.

If John 9:35 may possibly offer a glimpse of the historical Jesus, the authenticity of other Johannine Son of Man sayings should also be considered. The Johannine Son of Man sayings have similarities with multiple strands of the synoptic tradition. With Mark, John presents Jesus speaking of himself as *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου* in the three predictions of his death. With Matthew, John depicts the Son of Man as having the authority to judge at the end of time (5:27). Further, the Matthean wording at the beginning of the Sanhedrin saying is practically the same as the opening of the first Son of Man saying in John (1:51). With Mark and Luke, the Johannine Son of Man brings salvation (John 6:27; 6:53; see 3:14–16). With Luke, there is a shared immediacy to the Son of Man's glorification (John 12:23; 13:31), the Son of Man will come in his own glory (Luke 9:26), and the concepts of confession and faith are linked with the Son of Man (Luke 12:8; 18:8).

The similarity of these synoptic sayings with the Johannine tradition may either reflect a Johannine rewriting of these separate traditions, or it may indicate evidence of a separate Johannine witness to the Jesus sayings tradition (see Ensor 2006, 23). Of these two options, the former has been the typical view of scholarship, but the distinctiveness of some of the Johannine Son of Man sayings, particularly 9:35, suggests that John may have more to offer the Son of Man debate than merely corroborating the Synoptic sayings.