

Old Testament Background of Son of Man

The Old Testament Background of the Title “Son of Man”

Our Lord’s favorite title for himself is “the Son of Man,” which appears more than 80 times in the gospels (most often in Matthew). Illustration 1 (chart) shows the distribution of the term throughout the Greek canonical books. It appears mostly in the wisdom literature, the book of Ezekiel, and the gospels, and is rare elsewhere.

To understand this title, we consider first the general nature of the idiom “son of X” in the OT. Then we look at some noteworthy instances that suggest the term has messianic overtones. Perhaps the most important observation is that just as the term is used only of Jesus in the NT, in the OT it overwhelmingly describes the prophet Ezekiel, suggesting a relation between them.

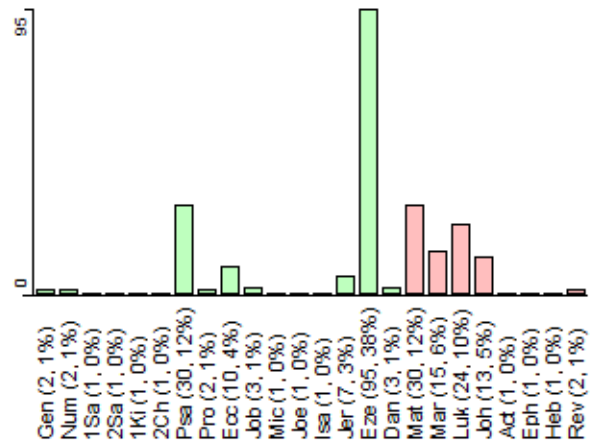


Illustration 1: υιος (του) ανθρωπου in the Greek Bible

Son of X

The expression “son of X” is commonly used in Hebrew to indicate someone with the characteristics of X (chart).

Jon 4:10 Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and **perished in a night** [was the son of a night]:

1Sa 10:27 But the **children of Belial** [worthlessness] said, How shall this man save us? And they despised him, and brought him no presents. But he held his peace.

2Sa 1:4 And David said unto him, How went the matter? I pray thee, tell me. And he answered, That the people are fled from the battle, and many of the people also are fallen and dead; and Saul and Jonathan his son are **dead** [sons of death] also.

So “son of man” would be somebody who is prototypically man. This appears to be the sense in which the expression is used in its first occurrence in the Bible:

Num 23:19 God *is* not a man אִישׁ, that he should lie; neither the son of man בֶּן־אָדָם, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do *it*? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?

Moses’ point is to distinguish God as God from man with his human limitations. There are about ten other instances of this usage in the OT (see notes).

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This meaning of “a typical man” leads to the term’s use in Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, as they grapple with the practical challenges of the human condition.

It is worth noting that of the four words often translated “man” in the OT (אדם, איש, אנוש, גבר), the Greek expression used by our Lord comes almost entirely from בן־אדם.¹ This word for “man” is identical with the proper name “Adam.” The Hebrew form appears about 520 times in the OT, 20 of which our version translates “Adam.” The sense “son of Adam” lends depth to the notion of “typical man, everyman” that the idiom suggests, and makes the title all the more appropriate for our Lord, who came as “the last Adam” (1 Cor 15:45), the “one man” who by his righteousness restored what “one man” destroyed by his sin (Rom 5:15-21).

Noteworthy Instances of בן־אדם

Most of the instances in the Psalms simply characterize the human condition. But at least twice, the expression has Messianic associations.

Psa 8:4 What is man אנוש, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

Like similar parallel pairs noted above, this emphasizes the lowliness of man. Yet the Psalmist goes on to say that God has put all things under man’s feet, alluding no doubt to Gen 1. As the writer to the Hebrews observes (2:8, 9), an honest glance at the chaotic world around us shows that this can hardly be a reference to man generically, and the same unruly world that leads to his skepticism must have been obvious to David.

Psa 80:17 Let thy hand be upon the man אִישׁ of thy right hand, upon the son of man *whom* thou madest strong for thyself.

Asaph is bemoaning the sad state of the people, and praying for the Lord to deliver and restore them. Clearly his reference here is to a ruler who will be able to bring about such a restoration.

This title is entirely appropriate for the Messiah. Throughout, he is to be the perfect man, but man none the less, who will exercise successfully the dominion over creation (Gen 1:28) that Adam abdicated by sin. If he is to be king over his people, he must be one of them:

Deu 17:15 Thou shalt in any wise set *him* king over thee, whom the LORD thy God shall choose: *one* from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee: thou mayest not set a stranger over thee, which *is* not thy brother.

If he is to redeem his people, he must be their kinsman:

Lev 25:48 After that he is sold he may be redeemed again; one of his brethren may redeem him: 49 Either his uncle, or his uncle's son, may redeem him, or *any* that is nigh

¹ See notes for details. בן־גבר appears only as a proper name. בן־אנוש appears only once, translated υἱος ἀνθρώπου. בן־איש appears 13x, 9x as a gentile or specific individual and 4x in the generic sense. These four instances, and one of the gentiles, are υἱος ἀνθρώπου, while the others are υἱος ἀδρός or something else.

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of kin unto him of his family may redeem him;

There remain 93 instances in Ezekiel, one in Daniel (8:17), and the Aramaic parallel בר אנוש in Dan 7:13 (translated υιος ανθρωπου, like all the instances of the Hebrew). Here are the examples in Daniel (chart). The first is clearly a Messianic vision, and our Lord alludes to it (chart).

Dan 7:13 I saw in the night visions, and, behold, *one* like the **Son of man** came **with the clouds of heaven**, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. 14 And there was given him dominion, and **glory**, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion *is* an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom *that* which shall not be destroyed.

Mat 24:30 And then shall appear the sign of the **Son of man** in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man **coming in the clouds of heaven** with power and **great glory**.

Mat 26:64 Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the **Son of man** sitting on the right hand of power, and **coming in the clouds of heaven**.

The other instance refers to Daniel himself:

Dan 8:17 So he came near where I stood: and when he came, I was afraid, and fell upon my face: but he said unto me, Understand, **O son of man**: for at the time of the end *shall be* the vision.

Because Daniel and Ezekiel were contemporaries in Babylon, and Ezekiel knows of Daniel (14:14, 20), we should consider them together. Daniel went into captivity before Ezekiel (606 BC vs. 597 BC), but both of Daniel's "son of man" passages are during the reign of Belshazzar, Nebuchadnezzar's grandson, while Ezekiel's ministry (and the use of the title to describe him) is much earlier, during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. Ezekiel's last vision (40:1) falls in the 25th year of the captivity thus about 572 BC, within the reign of Nebuchadnezzar (who ruled to 562 BC). Daniel 7 is in the first year of Belshazzar (about 553 BC), and Dan 8 in his third year, So the uses in Daniel are later than those in Ezekiel.

Dan 8:17 is most easily understood on the hypothesis that it alludes to the use in Ezekiel, and we will consider it in a few pages. But the instance in Dan 7:13 probably derives from the basic meaning of the term as "characteristic human," supported by the messianic anticipations in Ps 8 and Ps 80.² Though our version translates "one like the Son of Man," the Aramaic expression has no article. Daniel is simply observing that the one he sees approaching the Ancient of Days to receive "dominion, and glory, and a kingdom," is like "a son of man." In the context of the chapter, this human ruler stands in contrasts with the four great beasts (Aramaic "living things")

2 I reached this insight toward the end of the exposition in Matthew 8, so it is not reflected in the earlier discussion there. See the notes for analysis of the Aramaic translations of בן־אדם (the Targum). In most of the OT the translation uses שׂנא, as does Dan 7:13, but in Ezekiel the Targum uses בן־אדם, supporting the tracing of Dan 7:13 to the earlier usage rather than the application of the title to Ezekiel.

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in vv. 3-8 who have been ravaging the earth. This vision is firmly rooted in Genesis 1:28, where God gave man dominion over “every **living thing** that moveth upon the earth.” Adam lost that dominion through sin, and as a result the wild beasts have ravaged God’s creation, but the time will come when the promised Man will receive dominion to subdue them once more and restore the world to its Edenic character, as Isaiah foresaw:

Isa 11:6 The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.

The strength of our Lord’s claim based on Dan 7:13 when he cites the verse before the Sanhedrin rests not in any intrinsic semantic equivalence between the title and deity, but in the unavoidable Messianic associations of the passage, universally recognized by the Jewish sages. The deity of Messiah rests on the title “Son of God,” derived from the Davidic promises (2 Sam 7:14; Psa 2:7; 89:27), while Dan 7:13-14, drawing from Gen 1:29 and Isa 11:6, emphasizes that one who subdues the wild beasts must be the a son of Adam as well.

Ezekiel and the Lord Jesus

To one who knows the OT, the title “Son of Man” inescapably recalls Ezekiel, and our Lord’s choice of this title suggests that we look to parallels with Ezekiel for a clue to what he understands. So what does Ezekiel have in common with our Lord? Why would the Lord choose Ezekiel’s title to describe himself?³ To answer this question, let’s consider several striking characteristics of Ezekiel that apply also to our Lord.

He is called by a river, with heavens open and a vision of God

There are striking similarities between the calls of Ezekiel and of our Lord (chart, Table 1). In particular, Ezek 1:1 is the first time in the Bible that the heavens are said to be opened, and Matt

Time	Eze 1:1 Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth <i>month</i> , in the fifth <i>day</i> of the month,	Luk 3:23 And Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age,
Location by a river	Eze 1:1 as I was among the captives by the river of Chebar,	Mat 3:13 Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him.
Heavens opened	Eze 1:1 <i>that</i> the heavens were opened,	Matt 3:16 And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, ...
Visions of God	and I saw visions of God.	... and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him:

Table 1: Comparing the calls of Ezekiel and the Lord Jesus

³ For some of these parallels see C.H. Bullock, “Ezekiel, Bridge Between the Testaments.” JETS 25:1 (March 1982) 23-31, online at http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/25/25-1/25-1-pp023-031_JETS.pdf

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3:16 is the second.⁴ These similarities may have drawn the Lord's attention to Ezekiel and encouraged him to adopt the title that God gave Ezekiel.

He is among his people in their exile

The only other individuals called “son of man” in the Bible, Daniel (8:17) and Ezekiel, were the only prophets to the exiles who were themselves exiles (chart, Table 2). Jeremiah is their contemporary, but he is in Israel and when he ministers to the captives, he does so by letter (ch. 29).

	Location	Audience
Jeremiah	Jerusalem	Jews
Ezekiel	Babylon	
Daniel		Gentiles

Table 2: Prophets of the Captivity

Daniel speaks mostly to Gentile kings, some of whom pay attention; Ezekiel ministers among the captives themselves, who largely reject him. When he is called, the Lord tells him,

Eze 3:4 And he said unto me, Son of man, go, get thee unto the house of Israel, and speak with my words unto them. 5 For thou *art* not sent to a people of a strange speech and of an hard language, *but* to the house of Israel; 6 Not to many people of a strange speech and of an hard language, whose words thou canst not understand. Surely, had I sent thee to them, they would have hearkened unto thee. 7 But the house of Israel will not hearken unto thee; for they will not hearken unto me: for all the house of Israel *are* impudent and hardhearted.

He anticipates our Lord, who came among his people in their misery to minister to them. As “son of man” he can be “touched with the feeling of our infirmities” (Heb 4:15).

He is divinely designated as Son of Man

In Ezekiel, the title is always vocative.⁵ For example (chart),

Eze 2:1 And he said unto me, **Son of man**, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee.

Eze 2:3 And he said unto me, **Son of man**, I send thee to the children of Israel,

Eze 2:6 And thou, **son of man**, be not afraid of them,

Eze 2:8 But thou, **son of man**, hear what I say unto thee;

This is what God calls him. Many others were “son of man” in the sense of being human, but God singled out Ezekiel as the specific human through whom he would minister to his people.

The only other vocative instance of υιοσ ἀνθρώπου in the Greek Bible is Dan 8:17.

⁴ See notes for later examples.

⁵ Some writers note that Ezekiel is called simply “son of man,” but our Lord, “the son of man.” The difference is because the Ezekiel instances are vocatives, which are always anarthrous. Robertson p 465 cites Moulton p. 70 for the article with the vocative, but Moulton is talking about the use of the arthrous *nominative* for direct address. Bibleworks shows no instances of the article followed by the vocative in BGM.

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Dan 8:16 And I heard a man's voice between *the banks of Ulai*, which called, and said, Gabriel, make this *man* to understand the vision. 17 So he came near where I stood: and when he came, I was afraid, and fell upon my face: but he said unto me, Understand, **O son of man**: for at the time of the end *shall be* the vision.

Why does Gabriel give Daniel this name? Two points of connection are worth noting.

First, this vision takes place in the 3rd year of Belshazzar (8:1), 550 BC.⁶ Ezekiel's last vision was in the 25th year of the captivity (40:1), or about 572 BC, 22 years earlier. It may be that Ezekiel has passed away, and Daniel now takes his place as God's spokesman to the exiles.

We consider the second connection in the next similarity, about zeal for the sanctuary.

In the gospels, the title is always a self-description by the Lord Jesus. Our Lord is the prototypical man as the last Adam (1 Cor 15:45). Thus this title reflects his consciousness of the incarnation, of being the man uniquely chosen and set apart by the Father.

He focuses on God's sanctuary

The backbone of the book of Ezekiel is three "visions of God" (1:1-3:15; ch. 8-11; ch. 40-48; chart, Illustration 2).

Each vision concerns the Temple.

In ch. 1-3, he sees the glory of the Lord on his throne-chariot (chart). This appears to be the reality that the ark of

the covenant is meant to represent, but Ezekiel first sees it outside of the temple, in captivity in Babylon where it has come to visit God's people (chart).

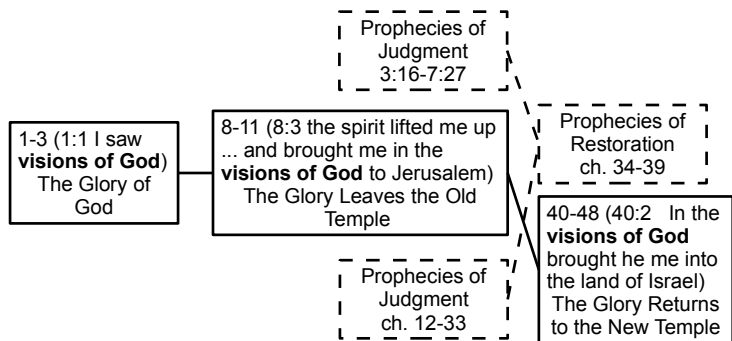


Illustration 2: Ezekiel and God's Sanctuary

Eze 1:4 And I looked, and, behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself, and a brightness *was* about it, and out of the midst thereof as the colour of amber, out of the midst of the fire. 5 Also out of the midst thereof *came* the likeness of four living creatures. ... 22 And the likeness of the firmament upon the heads of the living creature *was* as the colour of the terrible crystal, stretched forth over their heads above. ... 25 And there was a voice from the firmament that *was* over their heads, when they stood, *and* had let down their wings. 26 And above the firmament that *was* over their heads *was* the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone: and upon the likeness of the throne *was* the likeness as the appearance of a man above upon it. ... 28 As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so *was* the appearance of the brightness round about. This *was* the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.

⁶ Following Wikipedia's dating of the coregency with Nabonidus in 553 BC.

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This section ends with a declaration that echoes above the sound of the wings of the cherubim,

Eze 3:12 Then the spirit took me up, and I heard behind me a voice of a great rushing, saying, Blessed *be* the glory of the LORD from his place.

The last clause is confusing, but the Hebrew can be rendered, “The glory of the Lord is more blessed **than** its place.” That is, the glory of the Lord is more important than the temple.

Ezekiel must have been puzzled by this vision. Why would the glory of the Lord be in Babylon, rather than in the temple? The answer comes in the next vision (ch. 8-11). The Lord takes Ezekiel back to Jerusalem, where he sees abominations within the temple itself. He leads him successively inward (chart, Illustration 3), in each case taking him to a new **location**, showing him an **abomination**, and calling on him to **observe**:

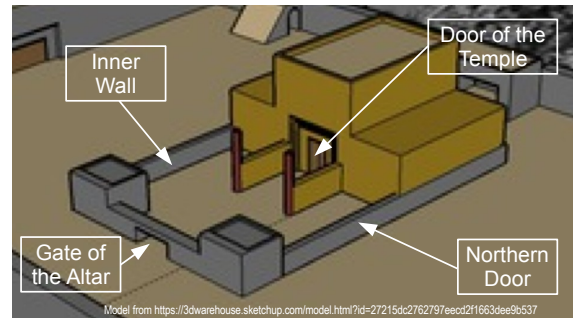


Illustration 3: Abominations in the Temple

Eze 8:5 behold northward at **the gate of the altar** this **image of jealousy** in the entry. 6 He said furthermore unto me, Son of man, seest thou what they do? *even* the great abominations that the house of Israel committeth here, that I should go far off from my sanctuary? but turn thee yet again, *and thou shalt see greater abominations*. ... 10 So I went in and saw; and behold **every form of creeping things, and abominable beasts, and all the idols** of the house of Israel, pourtrayed **upon the wall** round about. ... 13 He said also unto me, Turn thee yet again, *and thou shalt see greater abominations* that they do. 14 Then he brought me to the **door of the gate of the LORD'S house which was toward the north**; and, behold, there sat women **weeping for Tammuz**. 15 Then said he unto me, Hast thou seen *this*, O son of man? turn thee yet again, *and thou shalt see greater abominations* than these. 16 And he brought me into the inner court of the LORD'S house, and, behold, **at the door of the temple of the LORD**, between the porch and the altar, *were* about five and twenty men, with their backs toward the temple of the LORD, and their faces toward the east; and they **worshipped the sun** toward the east. 17 Then he said unto me, **Hast thou seen this, O son of man?**

Then, in the climax of this section, the divine glory leaves the temple, moving outward from the holy of holies (chart, Illustration 4).

First the glory leaves the cherub (singular) of the physical ark and moves to the threshold:

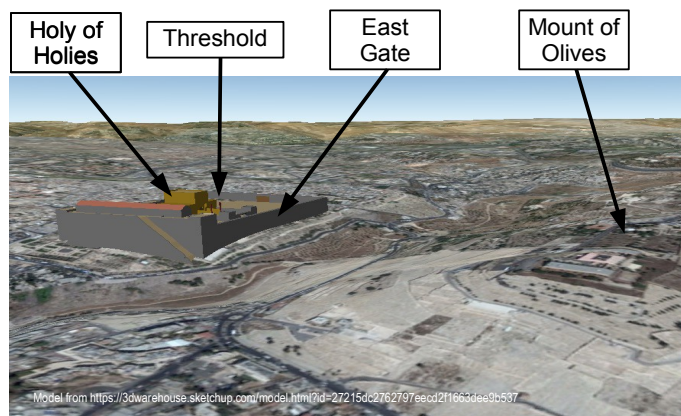


Illustration 4: The Departure of the Glory of the Lord

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Eze 10:4 Then the glory of the LORD went up from the cherub, *and stood* over the threshold of the house;

Next it mounts the chariot, which carries it to the east gate and pauses:

Eze 10:18 Then the glory of the LORD departed from off the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubims. 19 And the cherubims lifted up their wings, and mounted up from the earth in my sight: ... and *every one* stood at the door of the east gate of the LORD'S house; and the glory of the God of Israel *was* over them above.

Then the chariot, with the glory, moves to the Mount of Olives:

Eze 11:22-23 Then did the cherubims lift up their wings, ... and the glory of the God of Israel *was* over them above. 23 And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city, and stood upon the mountain which *is* on the east side of the city.

From there it moves to Babylon, where Ezekiel has already seen it in ch. 1.

In the final vision, the Lord shows him the temple that the Jews are to build upon their return. Chapters 40-42 contain detailed instructions, including measurements. Then ch. 43 promises the return of God's glory to this new temple, and instructs the Jews to build it (chart):

Eze 43:1 Afterward he brought me to the gate, *even* the gate that looketh toward the east: 2 And, behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east: and his voice *was* like a noise of many waters: and the earth shined with his glory. 3 And *it was* according to the appearance of the vision which I saw, *even* according to the vision that I saw when I came to destroy the city: and the visions *were* like the vision that I saw by the river Chebar; and I fell upon my face. 4 And the glory of the LORD came into the house by the way of the gate whose prospect *is* toward the east. 5 So the spirit took me up, and brought me into the inner court; and, behold, the glory of the LORD filled the house. ... 10 Thou son of man, shew the house to the house of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities: and let them measure the pattern. 11 And if they be ashamed of all that they have done, shew them the form of the house, and the fashion thereof, and the goings out thereof, and the comings in thereof, and all the forms thereof, and all the ordinances thereof, and all the forms thereof, and all the laws thereof: and write *it* in their sight, that they may keep the whole form thereof, and all the ordinances thereof, and do them.

Our Savior also reveals the corruption of the temple and cleanses it (chart). At the very beginning of his ministry, before he settles down in Capernaum,⁷ the Lord visits the temple, rebukes its abominations, and promises to restore a newer and greater temple, his body:

Joh 2:14 [Jesus] found in the temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting: 15 And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers'

⁷ See notes to Matt. 4. John appears to be chronological, and places the cleansing of the temple before our Lord's baptizing work in John 3, which happened while John was still active. The Lord moves to Capernaum (Matt 4:12) only after John is put in prison.

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money, and overthrew the tables; 16 And said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise. 17 And his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up [Psa 69:9].

At the end of his ministry he returns to the temple, having entered it over the Mount of Olives (retracing the steps of the departing Glory of the Lord), and cleanses it again:

Mat 21:12 And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, 13 And said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer [Isa 56:7]; but ye have made it a den of thieves [Jer 7:11].

Both of these episodes are marked with Scripture citations showing that this zeal for the temple was associated with the Messianic expectation.

His repeated criticism of the “scribes and pharisees, hypocrites” (ch. 23) probes the sources of this corruption. After rebuking them, he, like the glory of the Lord in Ezekiel 10-11, leaves the temple:

Mat 23:37 O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, *thou* that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under *her* wings, and ye would not! 38 Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. 39 For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed *is* he that cometh in the name of the Lord. 24:1 And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple:

And in the Olivet Discourse he warns of “the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet,” that will “stand in the holy place” (24:15).

The book of Hebrews makes a great deal of our Lord’s ministry in the heavenly tabernacle, “which the Lord pitched, and not man” (Heb 8:2).

So our Lord shares Ezekiel’s emphasis on the purity of God’s sanctuary, another reason for him to choose Ezekiel’s title as “son of man.”

During this age, God’s sanctuary is the church. If we would be like the Son of Man, we should treasure its purity and desire above all else to be among God’s people.

The emphasis on the sanctuary may be a second reason that Daniel shares Ezekiel’s name, in 8:17 (chart). In that chapter, the Lord predicts the desolation of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes (the vision of the he-goat, Alexander the Great, with four horns, one of which, representing the Seleucids, sprouts the little horn), and its subsequent restoration under the Maccabees:

Dan 8:1 In the third year of the reign of king Belshazzar [550 BC] a vision appeared unto me, ... 11 Yea, he magnified *himself* even to the prince of the host, and by him the daily *sacrifice* was taken away, and the place of his **sanctuary** was cast down. ... 13 Then I heard one saint speaking, and another saint said unto that certain *saint* which spake, How

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long *shall be* the vision *concerning* the daily *sacrifice*, and the transgression of desolation, to give both the **sanctuary** and the host to be trodden under foot? 14 And he said unto me, Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the **sanctuary** be cleansed. ... 16 And I heard a man's voice between *the banks of* Ulai, which called, and said, Gabriel, make this *man* to understand the vision. 17 So he came near where I stood: and when he came, I was afraid, and fell upon my face: but he said unto me, Understand, **O son of man**: for at the time of the end *shall be* the vision.

This chapter is the first place in Daniel that we encounter two words for “sanctuary,” 8:11 מִקְדָּשׁ and קֹדֶשׁ 8:13, 14. These two words are favorites of Ezekiel, who uses 11% of the instances of מִקְדָּשׁ and 41% of the instances of קֹדֶשׁ in the entire OT.

The vision of ch. 8 sets the stage for Daniel’s prayer for the restoration of the temple in ch. 9.

Dan 9:1 In the first year of Darius [538 BC] the son of Ahasuerus, of the seed of the Medes, ... 2 ... I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem. ... 3 And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes: ...16 O Lord, according to all thy righteousness, I beseech thee, let thine anger and thy fury be turned away from thy city Jerusalem, thy holy mountain: because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and thy people *are become* a reproach to all *that are* about us. 17 Now therefore, O our God, hear the prayer of thy servant, and his supplications, and cause thy face to shine upon thy **sanctuary** that is desolate, for the Lord's sake.

Dan 9:26 And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the **sanctuary**; and the end thereof *shall be* with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined.

From Ezekiel, through Daniel, and down to our Lord, the Son of Man represents man before God and God before man. He thus has a special interest in the purity of the sanctuary where God dwells among his people, its defilement, and its restoration.

He teaches in parables

Ezekiel uses parables more frequently than other prophets, including the enactment of the siege of Jerusalem (ch. 4), the useless vine (15:1-8), the lofty cedar (17:22-24, ch. 31), the boiling pot (ch. 24), the shepherds (ch. 34), and the valley of dry bones (ch. 37). Even the word “parable” appears more often in Ezekiel than in any other OT book (chart, Illustration

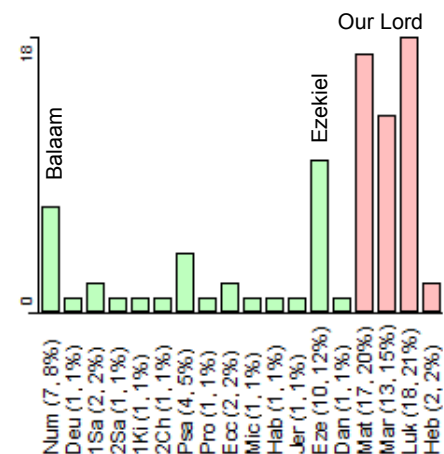


Illustration 5: παραβολη in the Greek Bible

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5). Apparently he was known for this tendency:

Eze 20:49 Then said I, Ah Lord GOD! they say of me, Doth he not speak parables?

Our Lord made extensive use of parables in his teaching:

Mat 13:3 And he spake many things unto them in parables,

Did he do so in part because he was following the example of Ezekiel?⁸

He bears the iniquity of his people

The expression “to bear sin” or “to bear iniquity” takes an interesting range of subjects in the Bible, including both Ezekiel and our Lord. To understand the implications of this description, let’s consider the four things that can “bear sin.”⁹

First, and most naturally, the sinner bears sin. Sin, or guilt, is a burden that we carry when we break God’s law (chart).

Lev 5:17 And if a soul sin, and commit any of these things which are forbidden to be done by the commandments of the LORD; though he wist *it* not, **yet is he guilty, and shall bear his iniquity.**

Second, God’s law provided that a sacrifice could bear the sin in place of the sinner. The most vivid example is the scapegoat on the day of atonement:

Lev 16:21 And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send *him* away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness: 22 And the goat shall **bear upon him all their iniquities** unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness.

This is a natural extension of the application to the sinner. If he is to be relieved of his burden, it must be transferred to a substitute, and that transfer lies at the heart of the Jewish sacrificial ritual.

Third, the priests and Levites are said to bear the sin of the people (chart):

[Moses to Eleazar and Ithamar:] Lev 10:17 Wherefore have ye not eaten the sin offering in the holy place, seeing it *is* most holy, and *God* hath given it you **to bear the iniquity of the congregation**, to make atonement for them before the LORD?

Num 18:23 But the Levites shall do the service of the tabernacle of the congregation, and

8 W. Harris, *Outlines of Sermons on the Miracles and Parables of the OT* (London, 1878), enumerates 1 for Ezekiel, 7 for Jeremiah, 19 for Ezekiel, 3 for Daniel, and 7 for Zechariah, but these are not exclusive (Amos has at least two: ch. 7 and ch. 8). And the definition of “parable” is not made clear.

9 “Thus we find it applied—(1) to the sinner; (2) to the sacrifice; (3) to the priest; and (4) to God Himself.” Smeaton, G. (1871). *The doctrine of the atonement, as taught by Christ Himself* (Second Edition., p. 104). Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

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they shall bear their iniquity: *it shall be* a statute for ever throughout your generations, that among the children of Israel they have no inheritance.

Exo 28:36-38 And thou shalt make a plate *of* pure gold, and grave upon it, *like* the engravings of a signet, HOLINESS TO THE LORD. ... 38 And it shall be upon Aaron's forehead, that Aaron may **bear the iniquity of the holy things**, which the children of Israel shall hallow in all their holy gifts; and it shall be always upon his forehead, that they may be accepted before the LORD.

By itself, the death of an animal cannot satisfy God's claim. Someone needs to represent the sinner before God, and that is the role of the priest. He bears the burden of the sinner's sin in this labor. Even the non-priestly Levites, in caring for the sanctuary, share in this ministry of allowing a holy people to come before God.

Finally, and strikingly, God himself is said to bear sin. We tend to miss this unity of thought in the OT because English versions generally translate the word, in this context, as "forgive." For instance (chart), God describes himself to Moses as

Exo 34:7 Keeping mercy for thousands, **forgiving** iniquity and transgression and sin, This must have been a mystery to OT readers, but in the light of the gospel we can perfectly well understand what God is saying. The only way a holy God can forgive the sin of his people is by carrying that burden himself, and this is what our Lord did when he died for us and rose again.

Ezekiel is a priest:

Eze 1:3 The word of the LORD came expressly unto Ezekiel the priest, Like every priest, while he was in Jerusalem ministering at the temple, he bore the sin of the people. But now he is in exile, far from the polluted temple that is about to be destroyed. Still, God assigns him a symbolic action by which he will continue to be the sin-bearer:

Eze 4:1 Thou also, son of man, take thee a tile, and lay it before thee, and pourtray upon it the city, *even* Jerusalem: 2 And lay siege against it, and build a fort against it, and cast a mount against it; set the camp also against it, and set *battering* rams against it round about. 3 Moreover take thou unto thee an iron pan, and set it *for* a wall of iron between thee and the city: and set thy face against it, and it shall be besieged, and thou shalt lay siege against it. This *shall be* a sign to the house of Israel. 4 Lie thou also upon thy left side, and lay the iniquity of the house of Israel upon it: *according* to the number of the days that thou shalt lie upon it **thou shalt bear their iniquity**. 5 For I have laid upon thee the years of their iniquity, according to the number of the days, three hundred and ninety days: **so shalt thou bear the iniquity** of the house of Israel. 6 And when thou hast accomplished them, lie again on thy right side, and **thou shalt bear the iniquity** of the house of Judah forty days: I have appointed thee each day for a year. 7 Therefore thou shalt set thy face toward the siege of Jerusalem, and thine arm *shall be* uncovered, and thou shalt prophesy against it.

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Like all the priests, he was typical of our Lord in this ministry, as Isaiah makes clear.¹⁰

Isa 53:6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the **LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all**. ... 12 he was numbered with the transgressors; and **he bare the sin of many**, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Of the four individuals who could bear sin, our Lord fulfills three of them. He was not a sinner, but he was the sacrifice that receives the wrath of God, the priest who presents that sacrifice to God, and God himself who ultimately bears the burden of his people's sin.

The title "son of man" is appropriate for this ministry because the redeemer must be a kinsman.

Summary

So we have seen that the application of the title to our Lord is the culmination of a careful development in its meaning throughout the OT (chart, Illustration 6).

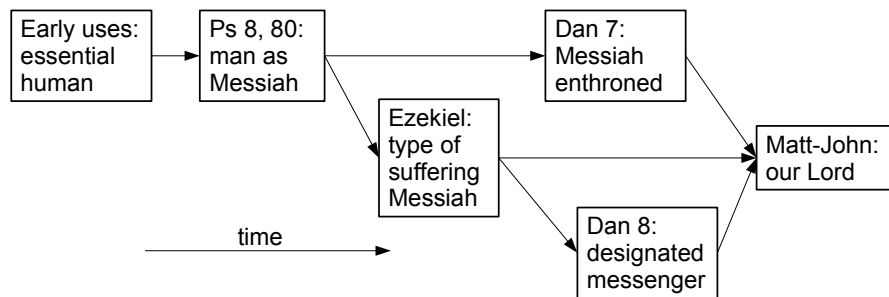


Illustration 6: Development of the Title "Son of Man"

¹⁰ In fact, at least one scholar has suggested that Isa 53 is prophetic of Ezekiel: Richard Kraetzschmar, Das Buch Ezechiel. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1900, p. 46. <http://books.google.com/books?id=eLmlaopuXSIC&oe=UTF-8>

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Notes

The expression **בן־אדם**, which lies behind most of the LXX instances of **υιος ανθρωπου**, appears 107 times in the OT. The vast majority (93) are in Ezekiel.

In seeking to understand the expression, we can pursue two lines of thought: the general “son of X” idiom in Hebrew, and some noteworthy instances of the term that might anticipate its use of the Lord Jesus.

Son of X

The general expression is commonly used to indicate someone with the characteristics of X.

Jon 4:10 Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and **perished in a night** [was the son of a night]:

1Sa 10:27 But the **children of Belial** said, How shall this man save us? And they despised him, and brought him no presents. But he held his peace.

2Sa 1:4 And David said unto him, How went the matter? I pray thee, tell me. And he answered, That the people are fled from the battle, and many of the people also are fallen and dead; and Saul and Jonathan his son are **dead** [sons of death] also.

So “son of man” would be somebody who is prototypically man. This appears to be the sense in which the expression is used in its first occurrence in the Bible:

Num 23:19 God *is* not a man **אִישׁ**, that he should lie; neither the son of man **בן־אדם**, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do *it*? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?

The point is to distinguish God as God from man with his human limitations.

The parallelism of **אִישׁ** with **בן־אדם** commonly has this sense, emphasizing the weakness and limitations of humanity:

Job 35:8 Thy wickedness *may hurt* a man as thou *art*; and thy righteousness *may profit* the son of man.

Jer 49:18 As in the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah and the neighbour *cities* thereof, saith the LORD, no man shall abide there, neither shall a son of man dwell in it.

Jer 49:33 And Hazor shall be a dwelling for dragons, *and* a desolation for ever: there shall no man abide there, nor *any* son of man dwell in it.

Jer 50:40 As God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah and the neighbour *cities* thereof, saith the LORD; *so* shall no man abide there, neither shall any son of man dwell therein.

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Jer 51:43 Her cities are a desolation, a dry land, and a wilderness, a land wherein no man dwelleth, neither doth *any* son of man pass thereby.

Instances with אנׁישׁ instead of אישׁ:

Job 25:6 How much less man, *that is* a worm? and the son of man, *which is* a worm?

Isa 51:12 I, *even I, am* he that comforteth you: who *art* thou, that thou shouldest be afraid of a man *that* shall die, and of the son of man *which* shall be made *as* grass;

Isa 56:2 Blessed *is* the man *that* doeth this, and the son of man *that* layeth hold on it; that keepeth the sabbath from polluting it, and keepeth his hand from doing any evil.

Other instances:

Job 16:21 O that one might plead for a man with God, as a [son of] man *pleadeth* for his neighbour!

Psa 146:3 Put not your trust in princes, *nor* in the son of man, in whom *there is* no help.

So in general, “son of man” refers to one who is quintessentially human.

Aramaic counterpart

The usual targumic counter part (in the CAL targum available as TAR in BW) is בן (א)נשׁ(א) (Num 23:19) or בר (א)נשׁ(א). Interestingly, in Pss, בן dominates except in 8:5, 80:18, and 146:3, where בר is used, as in Daniel! The only other exception is 49:3 בני אדם, which is transcription rather than translation.

Ezekiel appears to be בר אדם throughout.

The targum is probably later than Daniel, but it is our best evidence for the alignment between biblical Hebrew and Aramaic, and shows that the use of בר אנשׁ rather than בר אדם in Dan 7:13 is no obstacle to understanding it as standing in continuity with the earlier usage of the term in Psalms. The use of אדם rather than אנשׁ in Ezekiel suggests that at least in the mind of the Targumist, Dan 7:13 is to be understood in the light of Psalms and not Ezekiel.

Applications to man

Review possible combinations: בן־גבר, בן־אנשׁ, בן־אישׁ, בן־אדם,

בן־אדם

139x total, 107x singular. This is the regular source of $\tau\omicron\varsigma$ ανθρωπου.

בן־גבר

Does not occur; homographs are proper names in 1 K 4:13; Ezr 2:20.

בן־אישׁ

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13x in the OT, almost always in the sense of a specific person, and often used for patronymics and gentilics. Thus:

1Sa 17:12 Now David *was* the son of that Ephrathite בן איש אפרתי of Bethlehemjudah, whose name *was* Jesse; and he had eight sons: and the man went among men *for* an old man in the days of Saul.

But four times it refers to men generically:

Psa 4:2 O ye **sons of men**, how long *will ye turn* my glory into shame? *how long* will ye love vanity, *and* seek after leasing? Selah.

Psa 49:2 Both low and high איש גם־בני אדם גם־בני איש, rich and poor, together.

Psa 62:9 Surely men of low degree בני אדם *are* vanity, *and* men of high degree בני איש *are* a lie: to be laid in the balance, they *are* altogether *lighter* than vanity.

Lam 3:33 For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the **children of men**.

בן־אנוש

Only once, translated υιος ανθρωπου:

Psa 144:3 LORD, what *is* man, that thou takest knowledge of him! *or* the son of man, that thou makest account of him!

But Dan 7:13 is the corresponding Aramaic phrase בר־אנוש

The Greek translation is almost completely correlated with the meaning: refs in KJV

	No Greek	Υιος + gentilic	Υιος ανδρος	Υιος ανθρωπου
Specific person or gentilic	Gen 42:13; 1 Sam 17:12 (verse lacking)	Lev 24:10	1 Sam 9:1; 2 Sam 1:13; 17:25; 23:20 (but different parsing); 2 Chr 11:22	Gen 4:11
Generic reference				Psa 4:2; 49:2; 62:9; Lam 3:33

Parallels with Ezekiel

An extensive study in support of the thesis that Ezekiel is the source of our Lord's choice of this title is E.A. Abbott, *The Son of Man, or, Contributions to the Study of the Thoughts of Jesus*. Cambridge, 1910, readable online at <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015004999408;view=1up;seq=7;size=75> . (Interestingly, this is the same E.A. Abbott who wrote *Flatland*.)

“Heavens opened”

Here are the places in Scripture where “the heavens were opened” η νפתחו השמים + ανοιγω passive:

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Eze 1:1 Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth *month*, in the fifth *day* of the month, as I *was* among the captives by the river of Chebar, *that* the **heavens were opened**, and I saw visions of God.

Mat 3:16 And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the **heavens were opened** unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: (+ Luke 3:21)

Joh 1:51 And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see **heaven open**, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the **Son of man**.

Act 7:56 And said, Behold, I see the **heavens opened** [so MT; NA27 reads *διανοιγω*], and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.

Act 10:11 And saw **heaven opened**, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth:

Rev 19:11 And I saw **heaven opened**, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him *was* called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war.

A similar expression is used of sending rain or judgment, though it is the windows or doors of heaven that are opened:

Gen 7:11 In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, the same day were all the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the **windows of heaven were opened**.

Psa 78:23 Though he had commanded the clouds from above, and **opened the doors of heaven**,

Isa 24:18 And it shall come to pass, *that* he who fleeth from the noise of the fear shall fall into the pit; and he that cometh up out of the midst of the pit shall be taken in the snare: for the windows from on high *ממרום* are open, and the foundations of the earth do shake.

Rev 4:1 After this I looked, and, behold, a **door was opened in heaven**: and the first voice which I heard *was* as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter.

Once, God is said to open the heavens, though the verb differs:

Isa 64:1 Oh that thou wouldest rend *קרע* the heavens, that thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at thy presence,

Teaches in parables

Eze 20:49 Then said I, Ah Lord GOD! they say of me, Doth he not speak parables?

Mat 13:3 And he spake many things unto them in parables,

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W. Harris, *Outlines of Sermons on the Miracles and Parables of the OT* (London, 1878), enumerates 1 for Ezekiel, 7 for Jeremiah, 19 for Ezekiel, 3 for Daniel, and 7 for Zechariah, but these are not exclusive (Amos has at least two: ch. 7 and ch. 8). And the definition of “parable” is not made clear.

Παραβολη is the dominant (27/49) and dedicated (28/37) translation of מִשַּׁל. Consider the distribution of מִשַּׁל in the OT: 7x in Numbers (in Balaam’s oracles), 14 in Job-Ps-Prov, twice each in 1 Samuel and 1 Kings, and only one each in other books, except for Ezekiel, which uses the term 8x (more than any other book).