

Sayings 5: “Son of Man”

with Foxes, Birds, Lilies, Ravens, Sparrows, Grass,
Snakes, Stones, etc.

- We have already seen that “the son of man”, an expression often found in the Greek New Testament as a title for Christ (and in all later translations) derives from an Aramaic idiom with the plain meaning “a man” or “a person”.
- See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Son_of_Man

- Geza Vermes, professor emeritus of Jewish studies at Wolfson College, Oxford, has argued that "the son of man" in the Gospels is unrelated to ... Hebrew Bible usages. He [says] that there is no example of "*the*" son of man in Hebrew sources. He suggests that the term originates in Aramaic — *bar nasha*. Based on his study of Aramaic sources, he concludes that in these sources and in the Christian Bible, "son of man" is simply a synonym for *man*, and a substitute for the indefinite pronoun ("one"). Based on context, he claims that one should translate "bar nasha" as *someone, anyone* **or I**. He further argues that "son of man" is in no way a title.

בר נשא

[a-sh-n rb] = bar nasha

בר נש

[sh-n rb] = bar nash

- Aramaic has no articles ('the', 'a') definite or indefinite.
- The idiom can thus easily be mistranslated not only as '[a] son of man', but also '[the] son of man.'
- Imagine a newspaper headline: "**Son of senator found dead.**" Would this mean '[the] son of [some particular] senator' or '[a] son of [a] senator' ? It could be *either*, depending on context.
- It also seems fairly easy to mistake plural for singular.

“I will multiply your seed like the dust of the earth which no son-of-man can count.” (Genesis 13 in Aramaic).

Note that here “no son-of-man” simply means “nobody”.

- “A bird is not caught without the will of heaven. How much less the soul of a son-of-man.” [Remember this one]
- Here son-of-man is contrasted with an animal, and means ‘a human being’.
- There are *dozens* of surviving instances of this idiom in Aramaic literature from many periods, including closely before and after the time of Jesus.

Mark 2.24

- The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"
- Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

corrected version:

- Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So man is lord even of the Sabbath."

Mark 10.41

- You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. **For even the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."**

edited version?

- You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. **For a man does not come into this world to be served by others, but to serve.**

another good example:

- Mark 3.28: I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies **of men** will be forgiven **them**. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven.
- Mark 3.28, *King James version*: All sins shall be forgiven unto **the sons of men**, and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme. But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness.
- [or] All sins and blasphemies shall be forgiven unto **the sons of men**, wherewith soever they shall blaspheme.
- Luke: Everyone who blasphemes **against the Son of Man** will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

Matthew 12.30

- Matthew 12.30: Anyone who speaks a word against **the Son of Man** will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against **the Holy Spirit** will not be forgiven, *either in this age or in the age to come.*
- Thomas 44: Whoever blasphemes against the **Father** will be forgiven, and whoever blasphemes against **the son** will be forgiven, but whoever blasphemes against **the holy spirit** will not be forgiven, *either on earth or in heaven.*

strange, but true

- Paul *never* uses the expression ‘the son of man’ to refer to Jesus.
- He uses the expression only once, as follows:

What is man that you are mindful of him,
the son of man that you care for him?
(quoted from Psalms 8)

- **Why does he never use it?**

a guess:

- The Christological title ‘The Son of Man’ could only have arisen under the influence of non-Aramaic speakers. Aramaic speakers would always read the idiom in the right way.
- Paul spoke Aramaic.
- The use of the title arose after Paul wrote his letters — after 70 AD?

For consideration:

- Mark contains 13 uses of the expression “the Son of Man”. Of these, two seem to derive from sayings in which the expression meant simply “man”. So, he uses “Son of Man” (only) 11 times in a fully Christological sense.
- Matthew uses the expression 28 times, always in a Christological sense; Luke uses it 25 times — a striking increase.

Compare Matthew and Mark on the Sabbath story:

- **Mark:** Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? **He entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat.** And he also gave some to his companions. **"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."**
- **Matthew:** Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? **I tell you that one greater than the temple is here.** If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. **For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.**

and Thomas 27:

- **If you do not fast from the world, you will not find the Father's kingdom. If you do not observe the sabbath as a sabbath you will not see the Father."**
- This saying, even if early, looks like a polemical response to the relaxed attitudes to sabbath typical of other forms of Christianity.
- Plausibly, it originates with the strongly Jewish Christians, the Ebionites. Their texts (some in Aramaic, which they spoke?) may be the source of some of the more authentic Thomas sayings. The Ebionites also were associated with Matthew's Gospel (the most pro-Jewish Gospel). That may be why they preserve the (spurious?) 'parable of the weeds' which is found only in Matthew. Likewise, the blasphemy saying (44) seems to derive from Matthew.

A mysterious saying:

- Q: Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.
- Thomas 86: Jesus said, "**Foxes have their dens and birds have their nests, but human beings have no place to lay down and rest.**"
- [Foxes have] their dens and birds have their nests, but the child of humanity has no place to lay his head and rest."
- **No satisfactory explanation of this saying has ever been found** (in my view).

Plutarch, Life of Tiberius Gracchus:

- **The beasts,"** said he, **"in Italy, have their particular dens, they have their places of repose and refuge; but the men** who bear arms, and risk their lives for their country, enjoy in the meantime nothing more in it but the air and light and **have no houses or settlements of their own,** and are constrained to wander from place to place with their wives and children."

Epictetus, Discourses 1.16

Don't wonder if animals other than man are provided with all things for the body, not only food and drink, but places to sleep also, and they have no need of shoes nor bedding, nor clothing; but we human beings lack all those things. For, animals not being made for themselves, but for service, it was not fit for them to be made so as to need other things. For consider what it would be for us to take care not only of ourselves, but also about cows and donkeys, how they should be clothed, and how shod, and how they should eat and drink. As it is, like soldiers ready for their commander, they are shod, clothed and armed.

in outline...

People say, “The foxes have their dens, and the birds have their nests, but human beings are not provided [by God] with any place to lay down and rest.”

- *...but I say* that that in fact God cares about us far more than he cares about the foxes and birds... [?]
- *...but I say* that people are wrong to complain.... [?]

You people complain **“The foxes have dens, and the birds have their nests, but we do not have any place to lay down and rest!”**

But don't you know that you are far more valuable than the foxes and birds? Don't you know that God will provide for you, if you wish it? **Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! [Q]**

Don't complain...

Luke 17.7

Suppose one of you had a servant plowing, or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he came in from the field, 'Come and sit down, I'll make you some supper'? Wouldn't he be more likely to say, 'Make my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Would he thank the servant just because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'

[Don't expect life to be a picnic. Do what God asks of you, and shut up. Don't complain. Notice that this seems to be a response to people who *do* complain.]

Epictetus means...

- *Don't wonder* if animals other than man are provided with food...drink...beds...bedding...but we lack all those things (i.e., lack them in our natural state).
- *Don't be surprised* that other animals are provided for, but not us.
- *Don't worry that God is not looking after you* (as it *might* seem, when you notice that other animals seem better provided for by nature.)

and Jesus...

- I say, ***don't worry*** about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! [Q]
- Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body [in hell]. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So ***don't be afraid***; you are worth more than many sparrows. [Q]
- Again, these seem to be targeted at complainers, and people who deny divine providence by noting that people sometimes starve, or suffer discomfort, or are murdered.

and famously...

Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, **O you of little faith!** [Q]

[“O you of little faith” seems to refer precisely to *those who doubt that there is divine providence.*]

Remember Epictetus attacking the complainers, and those who doubt divine providence:

- But you may say, "There are some things disagreeable and troublesome in life." ...Well, then, and have you not received [from God] faculties by which you will be able to bear all that happens? Have you not received greatness of soul? Have you not received manliness? Have you not received endurance?
- "Yes, but my nose runs." For what purpose then, slave, have you hands? Is it not that you may wipe your nose?

- This was a question that preoccupied Hellenistic philosophy:
- Does God care about human beings and govern our lives benevolently?
- One argument put forward by *opponents* of the theistic view was as follows:
- *Human beings do not seem to be very well provided for compared to animals.*

E.g. Lucretius, the atheist (taken from Epicurus, the atheist)

“When a child is born it lies naked on the ground, lacking everything it needs to survive, and fills the air with mournful cries, as you would expect, given all the miseries which it will endure in life. But many wild animals grow without any need for nurses, or clothing against the weather, or weapons, or walls; for them the earth generously and spontaneously brings forth everything that they need.”

Protagoras (the agnostic), quoted by Plato:

- Some animals live below the ground, or can fly, to escape predators, others have weapons (claws and teeth); some have fur, others tough skin; and each has its own automatic bedding when it lies down to sleep. For food, some eat grass straight from the ground, others the fruits of trees, or other animals. But human beings are, by contrast, poorly provided for. They come into the world unarmed, naked, defenseless, without shoes or bedding, and with no natural means of survival.

- Epictetus: [Our opponents point out that] **animals are provided with all things for the body, not only food and drink, but places to sleep also, and they have no need of shoes nor bedding, nor clothing; but we human beings lack all those things.** [Discourses 1.16]
- Jesus: [You of little faith say that] foxes and birds have places to sleep, but human beings have no natural bedding. [But I say...]
- Is this a possible explanation?

- On this interpretation, this saying locates Jesus firmly within the *theological* debates of Hellenistic philosophy.
- The saying is (on this view) a fragment. At least half of it is missing. (Because later Christians had very little grasp of his philosophical interests?)
- Q gives the saying an odd *Christological* meaning. It is supposed to be about the

- As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."
- Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."
- [He means, if you follow me (the Son of man) **then you won't have anywhere to rest.**]

Can we adjudicate?

1. The contrast **animals** — **man** is natural and plausible.
2. The contrast **animals** — **Jesus** is very odd.
3. There is no other mention of Jesus not having a place to rest. In fact, he very obviously *does* have places to rest.
4. There is no mention of his followers lacking a place to rest.

5. The claim that followers of Jesus have no rest is contradicted elsewhere in Q:
6. **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." [Q]**
7. The correspondence with the other philosophical passages seems too strong and detailed to be a coincidence.
8. Note that *five* other Greek sources specifically mention the issue of *bedding*.
9. The argument over divine providence is one that greatly interested Jesus. Five other Q sayings (examined above) directly touch on the same issue.

alternative readings:

- Political: “Foxes [like that fox king Herod] and birds [i.e., the Romans, who use *eagles* as their symbols] have places to encamp, but I, the son of man, am not given my proper place. [???”]
- Far too complicated and obscure.

Remember the Plutarch passage:

- [Even] the beasts have their dens, they have their places of repose and refuge; but the [poor] who risk their lives [as soldiers] for their country have no houses or settlements of their own!
- Gracchus is complaining about **the treatment of the poor**, and arguing for land redistribution.
- Jesus: “[How outrageous that] even foxes and birds have places to rest, while [some] human beings have no place to sleep!”
- Jesus the social critic? This seems at least possible. We will return to this aspect of Jesus soon.

The moral of the story...

- The Gospel editors seem to have a *very limited understanding* of the sayings material that they are transcribing. This covers at least these areas:
 1. They read in *eschatology* when the sayings are in fact philosophical (especially Matthew).
 2. They invent *miracle stories* out of sayings (e.g., Mark's Beelzebul story; the fig tree story.).
 3. They make generic, philosophical sayings about *humanity* refer to Jesus himself.
 4. The latter may perhaps also explain the apocalyptic tendencies of the Gospel of Mark (Look out, the Son of Man is coming back!) We shall see...