

SON OF GOD AND SON OF MAN - PART 1 - TESTIMONIES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

1. INTRODUCTION

The discussion on the subject of the Son of God and Son of Man as honorary titles of Jesus Christ has accompanied the church and, consequently, theology from its inception. Already the gospels of the New Testament (NT) have used both terms in various contexts and in a variety of ways. However, in all New Testament writings these two honorary titles of Jesus remain dependent upon each other and supplement each other in order to present a complete portrait of the exalted Messiah. This interdependence of both terms emphasizes all the more how significant and indispensable this pair of terms proves to be for our understanding of the New Testament.

A critical question running along this topic throughout the theological discussion is: To what extent are these two honorary titles of Jesus of pre- or post-Easter origin? Did the Early Church attribute these titles to Jesus subsequently – therefore retrospectively – in order to prove that this Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah? Or do we find factual and redactional evidence in the gospels which elucidates to us how this pair of terms has accompanied Jesus already during his lifetime, although his disciples – at that

time – could not have possibly known exactly how the Old Testament (OT) prophecy would be fulfilled?

The second question which needs to be asked, is: What is the origin of these honorary titles and what is their meaning? The attempts of recent theology to locate these honorary titles outside the Jewish-oriental tradition, have aggravated but not illuminated this question without advancing far-fetched theories. Nevertheless we need to deal specifically with this issue and find definite evidence in the Jewish area for our understanding of Scripture.

2. ORIGINS OF THE HONORARY TITLES

If we start from the assumption that the New Covenant between the God of Israel and his people has taken place in the Jewish-oriental realm – a promise of a New Covenant is not available in any other tradition and religion, neither in the orient nor in the occident – then we have to start from the scriptures which contain this promise. Naturally this would be the canon of the Old Testament (OT) as it has been handed down by the Masoretes.

The attempt to set the course in the forefront of the analysis by advancing

a theory that the writings of the OT are not the prerequisite for the writings of the NT, as some theologians of the Western hemisphere have done, is fallacious. Because for this purpose, first of all a theory would have to be established that a collection of terms and words of the time of the formation of the NT had developed into a redactional opus, without roots in its own religion and tradition, although these very terms do have a well-founded basis in their own writings. This would amount to saying that all humans before us were ignorants and only we were rationals. This way of thinking is a confession of failure to understand other thought structures and to become acquainted with them.

Our way of thinking in the Western world is mostly based upon the philosophical approaches of antiquity. This is valid. However, we need to be clear about the fact that this philosophy is based upon presuppositions and findings which had been devised and interpreted before our times. Thus the philosophical terms of antiquity have developed mainly in the Greek and Hellenistic area across the centuries which resulted in a culture of terms and thought structures. Without this “pool” of knowledge and philosophical approaches the philosophy of the Greeks would not have achieved this perpetual existence.

It is beyond question that thoughts have been transmitted from culture to culture, especially in the Hellenistic area and therefore in the area of the later OT (Second Temple period). The Greek philosophical culture did not, however – neither then nor now – develop a “culture” of the two honorary titles “Son of God”¹ and “Son

of Man” as they occur in the OT or NT, which might have any noteworthy significance for our investigation. It is certainly relevant that some thoughts of the Hellenistic world – directly or indirectly – were utilized during the writing of these “revelations”, in the sense of supplementing or confirming one’s own tradition. However, these thoughts never replaced or abrogated the revelations of one’s own religion.

This paper attempts to highlight some of these tradition structures and to depict the various conceptions.

3. ORIGINS OF THE MESSIANIC EXPECTATION OF SALVATION IN JUDAISM

The origin of the Messianic expectation of salvation in Judaism is founded in the Thora. In Deuteronomy 18:15, Scripture promises through Moses: **A prophet like me the LORD, your God, will raise up from among you and your brothers; you shall obey him.**

After Moses came Joshua, who carried the torch of this promise to the promised land. After him came the judges, elected by God, who received the commission to guide Israel on the right path. After the judges came the kings, anointed by Samuel, who were called to protect the salvation of Israel.

First, Saul was anointed as king and therefore he was consecrated to establish the dynasty of the kings of Israel. But because Saul opposed the instructions of God and tried to determine in a selfglorifying way the destiny of Israel, God rejected

him. For God wanted to establish "his" kingdom among the people on earth and not the kingdom of a man. Therefore he made Samuel anoint the young shepherd David as king who was "according to the heart" of God. Through his faithfulness to God which became visible through his faithfulness to his covenant – therefore not through his impeccability – God gave to David and to his descendants, respectively, the promise: ... **I will confirm his royal throne forever** (2. Sam 7,13).

With this „eternal” promise to David and his house, the historical search for the “provider of salvation for Israel”, as promised in the Thora, is completed. From now on King David and his descendant was the promised shepherd of Israel.

Since the house of David and his throne were chosen forever, through this second promise the term Messiah (HAMASHIH = the anointed one) has been joined with the term „a prophet like me” of the Thora to an undissolvable union in the later eschatological expectation of salvation of Israel. From now on, the king of Israel – later, after the separation from the Northern Kingdom, only the king of Judah – was the mediator between God and the people.

3.1 Son of God in the OT

Especially in the context of this eschatological expectation of salvation which God gave to the house of David, we now find the indication of the first honorary title under consideration, which is "Son of God". After God had promised an eternal kingdom to David and his

descendants, he now reveals to him the foundation of this promise (2Sam 7,14): **I will be his Father and he shall be my Son.**

In this verse God promises to David that he will accept the descendant on his throne in place of a son, as “God's Son”. In the Hebrew text the term “BEN” is used for “son”, in the LXX it is „ÝION”. This verse is accepted by the majority to be the basis for the term ÝIOS THEOU, Son of God, as it occurs later in the NT.

Another indication of the term „Son of God” is nowhere else available in this form in the OT. In Gen 6,4 and Ps 29,1 and 89,7, respectively, we read about the sons of the gods (BENE ELIM) or about gods in Ps 82,6 and about sons of the most high, respectively (ELOHIM and BENE ELJON). However, both terms are translated in the LXX with ÝIOI = „sons”, therefore in the plural. The “individual” son as the Son of God (ÝIOS THEOU) does not occur again in the OT.

Jesus refers to this passage in Ps 82,6 in his discussion with the Pharisees (Joh 10,34.35), when the dispute over his divinity did reach a dangerous position among the Jews. Here, he remarks that they (the Jews) were described as gods (THEOI = ELOHIM). Although there is a reference here of sonship of humans to God, this word needs to be understood as humans being children of God when they receive God's word. This meaning is also referred to in John 1,12, where it is stated: **As many as have accepted him, he gave authority to them to become children of God who believe in him.**²

3.2 Son of Man in the OT

Regarding the origin of the term Son of Man in the OT there are two possible sources. Firstly, we read in Ezekiel 2,1ff the term BEN ADAM (Son of Adam), which Luther translated "child of man". The LXX translates this term with ΥΙΕ³ ANTHROPOU. In Arabic, similar to the Hebrew, the term Son of Adam (IBEN ADAM) is used. This construction of BEN with the word ADAM indicates in the semitic language the affiliation to the rational being, the human, who can hear and understand God. The opposite to this is an irrational being, the animal, which – although being a life-form biologically as well – however cannot perceive God.⁴

Hence the prophet Ezekiel is being addressed as a human who had been created in the image of God and not as an animal which although having been created by God too, it was not created in the "image of God" but als an irrational being which cannot communicate with God.

The actual source of the term „Son of Man" must be looked for in Daniel 7,13f where the prophet sees the throne of God in a vision: **I saw in this vision in the night, and behold, one like a son of man came with the clouds of the sky and came to the one who was ancient of days and was brought before him.**

The original text of Daniel has been written predominantly in Aramaic. In this passage we read the Aramaic term: BAR ENASH. BAR is the Aramaic word for „son" and ENASH means „man". There is only this one passage which is translated in the LXX as ΥΙΟΣ ANTHROPOU, as we find it in

the NT as an honorary title. We may assume that the Aramaic term „BAR ENASH"⁵ has been preserved in the Jewish tradition, after the exile until the coming of Jesus Christ, within the colloquial language, because at the time of Jesus the predominant language in Palestine was still Aramaic.

4. MEANING OF THE HONORARY TITLES IN THE JEWISH-SEMITIC CONTEXT

The question which challenges us regarding these two honorary titles, is: How was the term "Son of God" and respectively "Son of Man" understood and interpreted before the coming of Jesus Christ and how did the Biblical understanding of these two honorary titles develop by the time He came?

As the foundation of the interpretation of these honorary titles in the Jewish-semitic context we have to consider the prophetic writings of the OT as well as the wisdom literature (Psalms, Proverbs, etc.) which - on the basis of the Thora - have expanded this term and have provided it with the right framework of interpretation. Only on the basis of this "Jewish-semitic" framework of interpretation are we able to ascertain the meaning of these terms in the time of Jesus.⁶

4.1 Son of God in the OT

The understanding of this honorary title in the Jewish-semitic context needs to be interpreted carefully. As Christians we understand this title predominantly as a post-Easter term, in the sense of the Johannine interpretation as the "only begotten" Son of God⁷. But actually this

interpretation was not existent and not yet conceivable in pre-Easter times, as we shall see.

Three basic understandings of the messianic Son of God can be determined in the OT:

4.1.1 The prophet and mediator

In Deuteronomy 18,15 we can ascertain this essential attribute of the Messiah-terminology: **A prophet like me the LORD, your God, will raise up from among you and your brothers;**

The messianic Son of God is, first of all, a prophet who passes down the revelation of God verbatim to the people of God.

This word of God is primarily law. Since the law of God cannot be broken, however, the word of God is therefore also a prophetic statement for the future; because it will take place in the way as God and the law have determined it.

This prophet is, like Moses, a chosen person of God from the people of Israel, a man of the people.

4.1.2 Priest and messenger of joy (evangelist)

The „Son” was permitted to reign at the right hand of the Most Holy One because in Ps 110,1 there is the promise: **The Lord said to my Lord: „Sit at my right hand ...”.**

The question of who is related to this promise in Ps 110, causes Jesus to discuss this issue with his disciples in Mark 12,35ff (par.). This shows us that before and at the time of Jesus apparently the royal descendant of

David was understood as an “earthly” and not as a “heavenly” Messiah.

It is important to note the fact that this Son of God is endowed with priestly dignity, as we read in verse 4 of the same Psalm: **The Lord has given an oath and he will not renounce it: „You are a priest eternally according to the order of Melchizedek”.**

This anointed priest who has no beginning and no end, is at the same time the High Priest of the people.⁸

In Isaiah 61,1 we read a similar promise: **The Spirit of God the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor ... and to proclaim a favorable year of the Lord.**

According to Lv 25,8ff, one of the major responsibilities of the High Priest is the keeping of the Year of Remission on the Great Day of Atonement. Thus the Messiah is the representative of his people, both politically and spiritually.⁹

Here is a very interesting reference to the “good or happy news” which the High Priest is supposed to proclaim. This proclaiming of the “good news” is termed in the LXX „EUANGELIZASTHAI”, which means “to evangelize”. Thus already the OT establishes a connection between the Messiah and the “good” news. The “Gospel” therefore is not an “invention” of the post-Easter church, but an essential aspect of the “anointed” Son of God, the Messiah, as he had been understood already in the OT.

4.1.3 divine Son – but not „only begotten”

The dignity of the Son of God in the OT goes to the extent that divine attributes are bestowed on him without leaving the “earthly” dimension (Is 9,5-6): **For unto us a child is born, a son is given to us, and the government is upon his shoulders; and his name is wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace; that his rule may become great and no end to the peace on the throne of David and in his kingdom ... unto eternity.**

Not David himself – or his descendant – is eternal but „only” his throne. The reference to eternity is always established with the throne, not with the son of David who is understood as being mortal like his “earthly” father.

Although God's Son is called „mighty God” and „everlasting father”, his kingdom remains limited to the throne of David which according to Jewish understanding was located in the “earthly” Jerusalem. Therefore the descendant of David was always understood as “earthly”.¹⁰

A difficult passage regarding the question of the relationship between the Son of David and God is Ps 2,7. In this verse the Lord (JHWH) himself speaks: **I will proclaim the counsel of the Lord (JHWH). He has said to me: „You are my son, today I have fathered you”.**

To what extent does this word mean that the Messiah is „divine” or even the “only begotten” son, as John understands it in his prologue? The

Jewish tradition has difficulty with the interpretation of this verse, not least because it also carries the JHWH-formula in it.

The main question to be asked here, is: To what extent is the term “fathered” related to a physical sonship or to a messianic calling respectively inthronization?

Since in a monotheistic Judaism a physical relationship with God is unthinkable, here we rightly have to use the interpretation of an appointment as Messiah, like also most writings in Judaism have interpreted it.¹¹ Nevertheless Psalm 2 opens a door for the „metaphysical” (supernatural) coming of the Messiah which actuates this mystery.

As we have seen, the witnesses of the OT indicate to us that the border between the “earthly” and the “heavenly” Son of God is very narrow. For a post-exilic Jew who has learned to believe in the ONE God only (Dt 6,4) – because the faith in other gods has led him into exile -, it would have been unthinkable to understand “God's Son” as a “heavenly” being which would equal the faith in other gods.

Since the Messiah is certified in the OT writings as the descendant of David (2Sam 7,14), therefore the basic understanding in the Jewish-semitic context is always an „earthly” man who is endowed with divine authority, similar to Moses and Elijah who did great miracles. A “heavenly” Son of God who came from heaven and became man, was incomprehensible if not even unacceptable for the Jewish people.

4.2 Son of Man in the OT

While the messianic honorary title „Son of God” and its meaning in the OT provides several pieces of evidence and thus provides a framework of interpretation for the Jewish tradition, the perception of a “heavenly” Son of Man, as presented in Daniel, remains largely concealed in a mystical understanding. If we see Dan 7,13-14 and 12,2-3 in one context, the following characteristics of the Son of Man become apparent:

4.2.1 Heavenly being:

It is conspicuous that the Son of Man is described as a being with a great wealth of power which could not be attributed to any “earthly” born man. Also, his power is “eternal” and “imperishable”. Therefore in Jewish tradition the Son of Man is attributed to a “heavenly” and “imperishable” being, similar to an angel (angel Michael).¹²

4.2.2 Powerful being:

The fullness of power, honor and the kingdom which the Son of Man possesses, surpasses those of great empires on earth. The fullness of power in connection with the imperishability of the person of the Son of Man himself makes him to be an unapproachable personality which permits him to stand directly before God in heaven – and not in the Temple, like the Son of God.

This is a “superhuman” dimension and an existence in reality, not only in an imagery as the Temple of God on earth had been understood (Ex 25,9;40;26,30).

4.2.3 Judge of the final judgment day:

In Dan 12,1ff the final judgment is described to be introduced by the angel Michael. Therefore in Jewish tradition the angel Michael has often been understood as the Son of Man. This peculiarity of the Son of Man is described in the Gospel of John (5,27). Thus the Son of Man was understood as the Judge who would judge humanity in the end times.

It is striking that the honorary title „Son of Man” in the OT is nowhere connected to the term „Son of God” or the Messiah. The reason for this could be on the one hand, that the revelation in Daniel took place at a relatively late stage in the history of Israel. On the other hand, the reason for this “double prophecy” could have been the very fact that the Son of God is an “earthly” being whereas the Son of Man is of “heavenly” origin.

Also, the character of language of the Son of Man is peculiar, which is connected to the Aramaic language, the language of post-exilic Judaism and at the time of Jesus. The isolated revelation of the Son of Man in the OT and its language reference to the time when Jesus lived, establishes a connection between the revelation of this honorary title with the incipient coming of Christ and makes it as if it were one unit. This revelation of the Son of Man, as we shall see in Part 2, has the following characteristics:

- it begins with the book of Daniel
- it then goes on with the start of Jesus' service, which made him “arrive” in our world, and
- it finally becomes perfected through his death on the cross and his subsequent resurrection.

ENDNOTES

¹ Compare on this the state of research on the question THEIOS ANER in Joachim Gnilka, *Das Markus Evangelium* EKK Bd. II/1, p. 60.

² In the Greek text the term TEKNA, children, is used and not ÝIOI, sons.

³ Vocative form of ÝIOI.

⁴ Hebr. BEHEMOT, respectively, arab. BAHIEMA – compare on this „You fat cows on the mountain of Samaria”, Amos 4,1, respectively, Hos. 4,16.

⁵ See on this Graham Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (2nd Edition) p. 249.

⁶ The main problem of montheistic Judaism concerns the question to what extent a monotheist is able and permitted to allocate „divine” attributes to a „transient” man. For example, when we read about Abraham and Moses in the OT who have conversed with God „like with a friend”, we recognize that they still remain in the realm of transient mankind because their life came to an end – like the lives of other humans. Later on the idea of a „resurrection” of these prophets came up; however, it always remained in the sphere of the „human” and it was never transferred into the realm of imagination of the imperishable respectively divine, as it was among the gentile peoples. Exactly here we have the interface between monotheism and pantheism. Therefore, in the context of the Jewish-semitic framework of interpretation of the Bible, this realm should be defined by the term „revelation history”, for the following reasons:

- monotheism: the „oneness” of God and therefore the „oneness” of revelation

- absoluteness of revelation which cannot be randomly supplemented be-

cause it has been transferred from the „eternal” God to the „transient” man - effectiveness of divine revelation and conceivability of his divine interventions because they stand in reference to reality regarding the present and the own history (physics).

⁷ In the sense of: God from God, light from light, born and not created.

⁸ Compare Hbr. 7,1 ff.

⁹ The fact that this has been specifically understood in this way is visible in the consecration of the Temple in Jerusalem through Solomon (1 Kings 8) where he offers as king the sacrifices for the consecration of the Temple himself, in the sense of a mediator and priest.

¹⁰ The idea of a „heavenly” Jerusalem was not yet present at that time.

¹¹ Compare on this EKK Bd. II/1, Joachim Gnilka, *Das Markus Evangelium*, p. 61.

¹² Compare on this the *Encyclopedia Judaica*: Article on the Son of Man.

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