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The Son of Man

In the Book of Abraham's divine-council scene, God proposes to send a redemptive emissary to ensure that those premortal intelligences or spirits who entered their second estate and faithfully did "all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them" would have "glory added upon their heads for ever and ever" (Abr. 3:25–26). When the Lord asked whom he should send to be this emissary, "one answered like unto the Son of Man: Here am I, send me. And another answered and said: Here am I, send me. And the Lord said: I will send the first" (v. 27). This "first" personage to answer the Lord's call for a mortal representative of his plan of redemption is identified in other books of scripture as Jesus Christ (Moses 4:1–2; Ether 3:14).¹ Here, however, the premortal Jesus is not explicitly named but rather is given the title "one . . . like unto the Son of Man."

The title "Son of Man" has some nuanced difference depending on the context of its usage.² In biblical Hebrew, the phrase "son of man" (*ben 'adam*) connotes simply "mortal, human."³ In the book of Ezekiel, for example, it is used by God when addressing the prophet (for example

1. Note, however, that Moses 4:1–2 depicts Lucifer as being the first to present himself. How to reconcile this with Abraham 3:27, if at all possible, remains elusive. For a general perspective, see Andrew C. Skinner, "The Premortal Godhood of Christ: A Restoration Perspective," in *Jesus Christ: Son of God, Savior*, ed. Paul H. Peterson, Gary L. Hatch, and Laura D. Card (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2002), 50–78.

2. For a discussion from a Latter-day Saint perspective, see S. Kent Brown, "Man and Son of Man: Issues of Theology and Christology," in *The Pearl of Great Price: Revelations from God*, ed. H. Donl Peterson and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 57–72.

3. Donald Senior, "Son of Man," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1242.

Ezek. 2:1, 3, 6, 8; 3:1, 3, 10; 4:1, 16; 5:1; 6:2). In apocalyptic biblical works, most notably the book of Daniel (7:13–14), the Son of Man (Aramaic: *bar 'enash*), or, more technically, a figure *like* (*kē*) a son of man, is depicted as a sort of eschatological figure who assumes rulership over the earth at the end of days. “The figure in this passage [Dan. 7:13–14] is one *like* a son of man, meaning a divine figure who looked like a human. He will have authority and will be worshipped by all people. Note also the language tying this figure to the Davidic kingship ideal, that he will be a king whose kingdom will be everlasting.”⁴

This divine figure was developed in apocalyptic Jewish works from the time of Jesus (such as the book of *1 Enoch*) into “a divine messianic figure” and “a premortal being who was closely associated with God, would have dominion over all earthly kingdoms, would be worshipped by all people, would judge the wicked and overthrow his enemies, would establish an everlasting kingdom, and would be the ‘Messiah.’”⁵ Believed by his disciples to be this very eschatological figure,⁶ Jesus is identified as the Son of Man throughout the canonical Gospels and other New Testament writings (compare Matt. 27:64; Rev. 1:13).

In Latter-day Saint understanding, the title Son of Man takes on additional significance. One of the Adamic names for God the Father is revealed in Restoration scripture to be “Man of Holiness” (Moses 6:57; 7:35). Apostles James E. Talmage and Bruce R. McConkie have both linked Jesus’s identity as the Son of Man with his divine parentage as the firstborn of this Man of Holiness (compare D&C 78:20; 93:21–22; 95:17).⁷ As Elder Talmage taught, “The word of revelation, given in this day, makes plain the meaning as to who was the one and only supremely

4. Trevan G. Hatch, “Messianism and Jewish Messiahs in the New Testament Period,” in *New Testament History, Culture, and Society: A Background to the Texts of the New Testament*, ed. Lincoln Blumell (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2019), 75.

5. Hatch, “Messianism and Jewish Messiahs,” 76.

6. See, generally, Larry W. Hurtado and Paul L. Owen, eds., “*Who Is This Son of Man?*” *The Latest Scholarship on a Puzzling Expression of the Historical Jesus* (London: T&T Clark, 2011); and Benjamin E. Reynolds, ed., *The Son of Man Problem: Critical Readings* (London: T&T Clark, 2018).

7. James E. Talmage, “The Son of Man,” in *The Essential James E. Talmage*, ed. James P. Harris, Classics in Mormon Thought 5 (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 135–41; *Eighty-fifth Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (April 1915): 120–24; and Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 742–43.

glorified Man, whom Christ knew—God, the Eternal Father, the Father of the spirit of Jesus, and literally, the Father of His body. Therefore the title ‘The Son of Man’ is an appellation of glory, authority and power among all sons of men. The Son of Man is the Only Begotten of the one and only supremely glorified Man at that time.”⁸

That the Book of Abraham says Jesus was *like unto* the Son of Man, rather than being *the* Son of Man, might reflect the influence of the King James Version of the Bible on Joseph Smith’s translation, since that wording appears in Daniel 7:13 and Revelation 1:13. Alternatively, the comparative may have been used because Daniel 7, Revelation 1, and Abraham 3 are all visions, and the visionary *image* was *like unto* the actual Son of Man—that is, a sort of visionary or heavenly facsimile of the real thing.⁹

Whatever the case, the identity of the premortal Jesus as “one like unto the Son of Man” in the Book of Abraham might be understood simultaneously in the contexts discussed above. He is the firstborn of the Man of Holiness, the one who condescended to become a mortal “son of man” (compare 1 Ne. 11:14–36), and the foreordained Messiah.¹⁰

8. Talmage, “Son of Man,” 139.

9. An intriguing alternative possibility is that the Book of Abraham’s language in this verse (“one answered *like unto* the Son of Man”) reflects an underlying Egyptianism—what is called by grammarians the “*m* of predication.” In the Egyptian language of Abraham’s day, the preposition *m* (“in, inside,” “by means of, with,” “being, namely,” “of, with,” and so forth) could be used in an adverbial comment to indicate that someone or something serves in a certain capacity. This common usage of the adverbial predicate in Middle Egyptian acts to distinguish people and things by their function rather than by their intrinsic essence or nature. The simple examples used by grammarians are sentences like **iw=k m s3-i* (“you are [*like* or *as*] a son to me”) and *iw=k m sš* (“you are [*acting as*] a scribe”). See James E. Hoch, *Middle Egyptian Grammar* (Mississauga, Can.: Benben Publications, 1997), §24; compare James P. Allen, *Middle Egyptian: An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), §10.6; and Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 3rd rev. ed. (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1957), §38. If we pursue this line of thinking, then the Book of Abraham’s statement that “the first” was “*like unto* the Son of Man” would indicate that the premortal Jesus was answering the call to act or serve in the capacity of the “Son of Man” (that is, the redemptive eschatological figure prepared in the premortal council to effect the Father’s plan).

10. David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely, “Jesus the Messiah: Prophet, Priest and King,” in Peterson, Hatch, and Card, *Jesus Christ: Son of God, Savior*, 248–69.

Further Reading

Brown, S. Kent. "Man and Son of Man: Issues of Theology and Christology." In *The Pearl of Great Price: Revelations from God*, edited by H. Donl Peterson and Charles D. Tate Jr., 57–72. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989.

Skinner, Andrew C. "The Premortal Godhood of Christ: A Restoration Perspective." In *Jesus Christ: Son of God, Savior*, edited by Paul H. Peterson, Gary L. Hatch, and Laura D. Card, 50–78. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2002.