

Introduction

I am puzzled that a species that has subjected virtually the entire universe to its analytical gaze and has penetrated to the tiniest constituents of matter still knows next to nothing about how to become human. I am greatly agitated that our society seems to be losing the battle for humanization. Violence, domination, killing, disrespect, terror, environmental degradation, and want have reached intolerable levels. Likewise, I am bewildered, having lived the greater part of my life, that I know so little about becoming human myself. I am shocked that I am still so largely an amalgam of conventions and opinions and so little in touch with my real thoughts and feelings. Who am I? What might I become? Why have so many of us sold out to miniaturized versions of ourselves?

These are some of the questions that prompt this study of the biblical expression, "the son of the man." The farther I penetrate into the mystery of this term, the more profound and provocative it seems. I have struggled with this puzzle long enough to suspect that the real reward lies not in deciphering the riddle but in wrestling with it. It may be that the "son of the man" is a genuine enigma, an irreducible riddle. But nothing so piques the curiosity of humans as the inexplicable. Perhaps our curiosity is a symptom of a desire to become more human. Like all who have gone before and will follow, then, I rise to the bait.

In this book I am exploring the hypothesis that this opaque figure, the son of the man, is a catalyst for human transformation: unchanging and unchanged, yet changing those who dare come in contact with it. It seems that there is within us, deeply buried or just below the surface, something that knows better than we the contours of our own true face, or that "new name that no one knows except the one who receives it," as Rev. 2:17 mysteriously hints.*

A word, then, about the spirit in which I will conduct this inquiry. This book shares in a growing effort to cast the original truths of Christianity in new molds that have a more lively appeal for people in our day. For my part, I have been searching among the records of Judaism and Christianity to see if there are perhaps other ways to interpret, and live out, the original impulse of Jesus. I want to reflect both exegetically and theologically on how that impulse, inaugurated by Jesus, can open to us the present possibilities of the past. I do so as one who is deeply committed to what Jesus revealed. I believe that the churches have to a tragic extent abandoned elements of that revelation. I do

not wish to throw the whole enterprise overboard, however. The Gospels continue to feed me, as does all of Scripture, even the worst parts of it, and some churches are impressively faithful. But if Scripture is to speak to those who find its words dust, we will have to radically reconstitute our reading of these seminal texts.

My supposition is that something terrible has gone wrong in Christian history. The churches have too often failed to continue Jesus' mission. I grant that the church fathers sometimes understood the implications of the gospel *better* than the earliest Christians, who lacked the perspective of hindsight. But there is a disappointing side as well: anti-Semitism, collaboration with oppressive political regimes, the establishment of hierarchical power arrangements in the churches, the squeezing of women from leadership positions, the abandonment of radical egalitarianism, and the rule of patriarchy in church affairs. Those of us who are to varying degrees disillusioned by the churches feel that it is not only our right but our sacred obligation to delve deeply into the church's records to find answers to these legitimate and urgent questions:

- Before he was worshiped as God incarnate, how did Jesus struggle to incarnate God?
- Before he became identified as the source of all healing, how did he relate to, and how did he teach his disciples to relate to, the healing Source?
- Before forgiveness became a function solely of his cross, how did he understand people to have been forgiven?
- Before the Kingdom of God became a compensatory afterlife or a future utopia adorned with all the political trappings that Jesus resolutely rejected, what did he mean by the Kingdom?
- Before he became identified as messiah, how did he relate to the profound meaning in the messianic image?
- Before he himself was made the sole mediator between God and humanity, how did Jesus experience and communicate the presence of God?

It is, of course, conceivable that the surviving data do not permit us to distinguish the Jesus of the Gospels from the gospel of Jesus. However, it is

my considered judgment that there is sufficient evidence to develop an alternative mode of access to Jesus. Specifically, clues and traces in the Gospels provide flashes of authenticity that seem incontrovertibly to go back to Jesus, or to a memory of him equally true. When we finish our quest, however, we will not have the historical Jesus "as he really was," for such a feat is impossible. If we are successful, we will have contributed, through historical reflection and interpretation, to a new myth, *the myth of the human Jesus*.

Toward that end, I will attempt to construct a christology from below, using the son of the man sayings as my guide. Our itinerary will start with the use of the expression in the Hebrew Scriptures and in later, non-canonical data. Then we will focus on the pre-Easter and post-Easter son of the man sayings ascribed to Jesus. We will conclude with the striking parallels in Jewish mysticism and Gnosticism that show that the son of the man was an archetypal phenomenon touching others than Christians in that world. But first we must discuss the presuppositions and methods that undergird this book, and to that we now turn.

*To use Carl Jung's terms, the son of the man may be considered an image of the archetype of wholeness, that mediates between the transcendent Self and the individual ego.