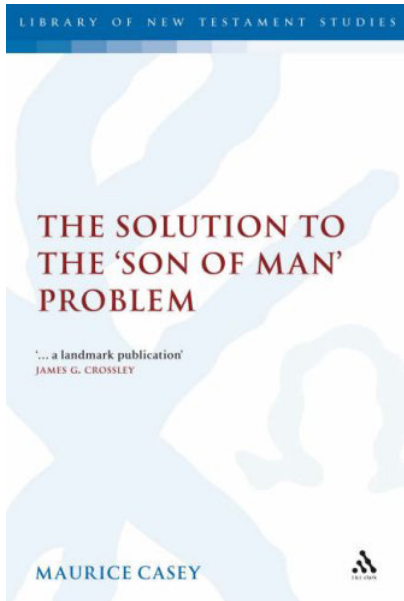


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Casey, Maurice

The Solution to the 'Son of Man' Problem

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In this *magnum opus*, Maurice Casey sets forth his most thorough case yet for his view of the controversy surrounding the expression “son of man” in the Gospels. In a massive collection of his lifetime of research, he restates long-held positions but brings them up to date in light of criticism and the latest scholarship. The ambition that is represented by his project is in itself quite remarkable, and he is deserving of a great deal of credit for his industrious labors in the field. There can be no question but that all subsequent discussions of this topic will have to take his work into consideration. The underlying point from which he operates throughout is really quite simple: in Aramaic, the underlying terminology for “son of man” that was used by Jesus was *bar (e)nash(a)*. In the original language, this was pure and simply an ordinary term for “man” and therefore could not have been used, as the Gospels everywhere use the translated Greek expression, as a messianic title. It is Casey’s contention that all genuine “son of man” sayings, which go back to the historical Jesus, retain a general level of meaning that is never left behind in its special application to Jesus. The failure to reflect such a general level of meaning is one sure sign of inauthentic material in the “son of man” sayings.

Casey begins his work in chapter 1 with a thorough summary of the history of thought on the subject, beginning with the early church fathers and working his way to the modern

period. Virtually the entirety of the patristic witness is set aside as useless (1–10), due to the tendency toward anachronistic theologizing and the influence of the Gospels' own inaccurate information. This includes the commentary of the Syriac-speaking fathers, who might be presumed to have an understanding of the linguistic issues involved, "since they spoke and wrote in the same language as the historical Jesus" (7). However, since their understanding of the "son of man" expression in the Greek Gospels fails to reflect the general level of meaning that Casey insists was always present in the underlying Aramaic expression used by the historical Jesus, their views are declared to be of "limited value" (10).

Casey continues his survey, moving through the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, noting that the bulk of discussion continued to be hampered by "pre-critical" exegesis (15), bad "assumptions about the translation process from Aramaic into Greek" (12), and the faulty expectation that "Jesus meant what the Greek text of the Gospels seems to say" (16). Though Casey summarizes a great deal of German scholarship, for some reason he leaves completely out of his discussion Gustaf Dalman's *Die Worte Jesu: Mit Berücksichtigung des nachkanonischen jüdischen Schrifttums, und der aramäischen Sprache* (Leipzig, 1898). Since Dalman is arguably the most accomplished Aramaist of the nineteenth century, the omission is curious, especially since he spends some eight pages giving detailed attention to the "son of man" question, offering conclusions very much at odds with Casey's assertions. As Casey moves into the twentieth century and beyond, other curious omissions include any meaningful interaction with key scholars who have made important contributions to the study of the linguistic data, including Matthew Black, Joachim Jeremias, Joseph Fitzmyer, Larry Hurtado, and the 2001 *JSNT* article by myself and David Shepherd, in which we critique Casey in considerable detail for his mistaken use of the Aramaic data ("Speaking Up for Qumran, Dalman and the Son of Man," *JSNT* 81 [2001]: 81–122).

In chapter 2 Casey puts forth his case in the attempt to provide a rationale for his handling of the Aramaic evidence. His presentation on 56–59 is somewhat curious, as it argues for the continuity of vocabulary and incidental syntactical features throughout the history of the language. It is not at all obvious what Casey is attempting to prove. Who denies that some Aramaic vocabulary used in the Dead Sea Scrolls also shows up in later rabbinic texts? And would anyone deny that some syntactical features of a language will remain constant over time? His discussion of the emphatic state and its occurrence with generic nouns (59–61) is weakened by the fact that he asserts that *bar (e)nash(a)* is in fact used as *generic* terminology for "man" (or humankind), an assertion that finds no clear support whatsoever in Middle Aramaic materials from around the time of Jesus. What one consistently finds in the earlier sources is the occasional use of the indefinite *bar enash* to speak about some particular man and the avoidance of the emphatic state in the

singular altogether in mundane statements. Generic statements employing this terminology regularly use the plural forms.

A glaring methodological problem raises its head on 61–80, as Casey indiscriminately mixes together examples (singular and plural) drawn from early sources such as the *Sephire* inscriptions and the Dead Sea Scrolls with much later targumic and talmudic materials, ignoring the shift in terminological usage that can be clearly charted from the earlier to later periods (see Owen and Shepherd, 111). The only relevant examples (employing the singular form in the right time period) fail to attest to any generic (as opposed to simply indefinite) use.

In chapter 3 Casey goes on to give a detailed discussion of Dan 7, the Similitudes of Enoch, and 4 Ezra 13. He gives thorough and rigorous defenses of his interpretations, though not all will be convinced by his readings. His argument that the “son of man” in Dan 7:13–14 is only a symbol for the triumphant people of Israel founders upon several textual details: (1) he comes “with the clouds” (indicating his heavenly origin); (2) he is said to be “like” a son of man (pointing to his supra-human nature); (3) he is to be served by “all peoples, nations and languages,” which would include Israel itself; and (4) interpreting the “son of man” as only a symbol of Israel leaves the kingdom of God without any individual corresponding to the kings of the previous four kingdoms (see 7:17). It is much more likely that the figure spoken of here is to be understood as a heavenly being, whether the angel Michael (see 10:13) or some other unidentified person with a heavenly origin.

Casey’s detailed discussion of the Similitudes of Enoch puts on display a massive amount of learning, moving fluently between the Ethiopic and Aramaic data (91–111). Casey argues that the usages of the relevant terminology for “son of man” do not reflect any allusions to a messianic title drawn from Dan 7 but simply reflect normal Aramaic terminology for “man,” referring throughout the document to the figure of Enoch himself. But his whole explanation is built on a shaky foundation. Even if we *were* to agree with Casey that Enoch is the “son of man” throughout the Similitudes (and to be fair, he makes an excellent case for his view), it has no bearing on the connection with Dan 7, which is plainly evident in the imagery of the first reference (1 En. 46:1–4), though Casey downplays it as simply some “reminiscences” of Dan 7:13 (111). Casey would have us believe that all subsequent references to a “son of man” (involving three different Ethiopic expressions) within the text are simply alluding to the “man” described in chapter 46, with no attempt to develop the language of Dan 7:13 into a title for the Messiah. But Casey can offer no adequate reason as to why we should not conclude that the author/audience of the Similitudes saw the man Enoch in messianic terms as the earthly manifestation of the elect, preexistent agent of God’s revelation and eschatological

judgment. It strains credulity, in light of the Danielic allusions within 46:1–4, to think that the figure would be repeatedly described as a “son of man” throughout the Similitudes (46:2, 3, 4; 48:2; 62:5, 7, 9, 14; 63:11; 69:26, 27, 29; 70:1; 71:14, 17), with no awareness or intentional allusion to the language employed in the same biblical passage *from which the original description was drawn*.

Casey’s discussion of 4 Ezra 13 is very short (112). He basically argues that the original Hebrew wording of the passage probably did not use the term “son of man” but simply “man” (reflected in the word *homo* found in the Latin version). But this is pure obfuscation. Whatever the original language and terminology (whether Hebrew or Aramaic), it is clear that the imagery and eschatological expectation conveyed in 13:1–13 is drawn out of Dan 7 and applied to a specific messianic figure (13:21–56). This is all that is necessary to see the passage as bearing witness to an appropriation of Dan 7 that has some bearing on the “son of man concept” (which does not require a son of man *title*).

In chapters 4–9 Casey discusses and offers detailed (and highly speculative) Aramaic reconstructions of son of man sayings that he views as authentic. In order to preserve his thesis, however, he must sometimes put absurd statements on the lips of Jesus to recover his original *ipsissima verba*. Casey argues that each of these instances involves a general level of meaning that has a more specific application to Jesus. Not all of the examples are equally implausible. Mark 2:27–28 is understood somewhat plausibly as originating in a statement by Jesus affirming human mastery over the Sabbath (121–25). Mark 9:11–13, in Casey’s reconstruction, becomes a statement about John the Baptist that has a secondary application to Jesus and others like them, which is transformed into a statement about Jesus only when translated into Greek (125–31). It is also possible that Jesus here (as at other times) spoke of himself allusively as a “son of man” (as Jeremias, Black, and Bauckham have suggested), so as to suggest in this instance that others should see in John’s martyrdom a foreshadowing of his own fate. Both of these discussions by Casey are suggestive and potentially illuminating, but as we move into other examples the fruit begins to dry up.

Mark 10:45 becomes a general maxim for the sake of the disciples that “the purpose of life is service” (132). Mark 14:21 becomes a general statement condemning traitors (135). Matthew 11:19//Luke 7:34 becomes an assertion that people must eat and drink in order to live (137). Matthew 12:32//Luke 12:10 (cf. Mark 3:28–29) is taken (in this case more plausibly) as stemming from an original comparison between the consequences of speaking against men versus speaking against God’s spirit (140). Mark 2:10 is reduced to an original assertion that God has given some people the power to heal psychosomatic illnesses (165). Matthew 8:19–20//Luke 9:57–58 is understood as a comment upon the difficult life of those who accept a migratory ministry (177–78). Luke 12:8–9//Matthew

10:32–33 and Mark 8:38 originates as a statement about the role of the heavenly court (which will include humans alongside angels) in the final judgment (185). Luke 22:48 is a reflection upon the human experience of betrayal (198). Mark 8:31 is reduced to the truism that all men must eventually die but will be raised at the resurrection (202–3, 205–6). In chapter 10 Casey discusses other “son of man” sayings, all of which are rejected as creations of the early church (212–45) because they cannot be reconstructed into Aramaic utterances that bear the general level of meaning Casey insists was always present in Jesus’ speech patterns employing *bar (e)nash(a)*. The “son of man” sayings in the Gospel of John are set aside on similar grounds (274–313).

These detailed discussions invite a lot of skepticism, despite the prodigious scholarship put on display by the author. How much stock should we put in Casey’s reconstructions of Jesus’ original Aramaic? And how useful are they as a barometer of authenticity? The capacity to give accurate reconstructions of Jesus’ *ipsissima verba* must presume *either* that our Greek Gospel sayings are fairly literal renderings of Jesus’ actual utterances (as opposed to general paraphrases) or at least that we still have the capacity to reliably distinguish between what originates from his own words and what is the result of editing and theological elaboration in the sayings material. But without an actual collection of Jesus’ Aramaic sayings with which to compare, such judgments are extremely difficult to draw out in detail (see Casey’s discussion of related matters on 246–73). While the recovery of Semitisms in the Greek sayings material may tend to weigh (albeit inconclusively) in favor of historical authenticity, it is dubious to give the impression that sayings that cannot be satisfactorily reconstructed by modern scholars into formally equivalent Aramaic originals should be presumed inauthentic on those grounds. Furthermore, the attendant meanings of the reconstructions Casey offers are too often simply incredible. Are we really to believe that the historical Jesus mainly went around espousing general maxims about the human condition? Was he utterly unwilling to make statements *exclusively* about himself and his unique significance, without drawing such notions out of more mundane observations applicable to people in general?

On the whole, Casey is to be commended for a remarkable piece of scholarship that at times contains many illuminating discussions of a plethora of matters related to Jewish culture, Aramaic, translation theory, and the historical Jesus. How convincing his particular suggestions prove to be within the broader academy is something that remains to be seen.