

WERE THE NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS SIMPLY REFUSING TO 'RESOLVE THE ISSUE' OF CHRIST'S DUAL NATURE OR WERE THEY STRUGGLING TO PORTRAY THEIR EXPERIENCE OF THE DIVINE JESUS?

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1 Introduction

Jesus is to the New Testament writers and to us believers today both man and God who came to save us, as exemplified by John 20:31 “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” “Christ” implies that Jesus is the man whom the Old Testament prophets foreshadowed, the Messiah who would save Israel. The “Son of God” means in this context that Jesus is divine. The combination is essential for Jesus to be able to offer us salvation – only God himself can achieve salvation while only a fully human Jesus could be our representative and accept our place in suffering for sin. In this essay, we shall seek to probe how the New Testament writers presented Jesus’ nature – was it “failure to resolve” the issue, a struggle to come to terms with their experience, or something else?

2 Jesus’ titles in the Gospels

It is useful to begin by assessing how Jesus saw himself. In John 20:31, Jesus is seen as both the Christ, an expression for the Messiah, and the Son of God. The Messiah means “anointed one” and would be seen by the Jews as a human figure. The Old Testament is replete with references to the Messiah such as in God’s promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:12-13 “I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever”. Jesus acknowledges the title as for example when Peter proclaims in Mark 8:29 “You are the Christ”.

Jesus also accepted divine titles. A powerful example of Jesus claiming divinity is when he states to the Pharisees “before Abraham was born, I am!” (John 8:58) quoting God’s own name to Moses in the desert. Thomas states that Jesus is “My Lord and my God!” in John 20:28 and Jesus does not demur. Whereas Lord may refer to human “master” it was also an Old Testament substitute for Yahweh. Jesus sees himself as Lord from Psalm 110, a divine use of the title, in Matthew 22:44 “The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.” Again, although sometimes humans such as rulers and emperors are called Son of God, in context the Sanhedrin, thought it to be blasphemous Luke 22:70 “They all asked, “Are you then the Son of God?” He replied, “You are right in saying I am.”.

Jesus’ key title in the Gospels is not, however, the Messiah/Christ or Son of God, but the Son of Man. Messiah in particular had overtones of military victory that Jesus sought to avoid as in John 6:15 “Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself”.

“Son of Man” in my view does convey Jesus’ dual nature well and indicate his self-awareness of it. It is all the more powerful evidence since the name is virtually absent from the rest of the New Testament. What does the Son of Man convey from the Old Testament? First there are humble overtones as simply an insignificant man before God, see Psalm 8:4 “What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him”. As Son of Man Jesus is vulnerable as Matthew 8:20 “Jesus replied, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”

Second, it is used in referring to a prophet, still noting Jesus’ humanity and the distinction between him and the divine source of their message. This is most common in Ezekiel, for example Ezekiel 2:3 “He said: “Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites”. Jesus links himself as Son of Man notably to Jonah, as in Matthew 12:29 “For as Jonah was three days

and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Third there is the divine Son of Man from Daniel, a mighty figure descending from heaven, the eternal ruler and judge of earth and heaven, who shares God’s power. We cite here Daniel 7:13 “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power...”. Jesus’ divine aspects often link to the Son of Man in this context. In Matthew 9:5, Jesus links the right to forgive sins explicitly to his status as the “Son of Man”, as does the figure in Daniel. Again, the Son of Man is linked to judgement in Matthew 25:31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” Jesus as Son of Man claims to be God in Matthew 12:8 “For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

Fourth, and powerfully, Jesus himself uses Son of Man to refer to Isaiah’s suffering servant, as in Mark 10:45 where Jesus shows the disciples that as Son of Man he came to serve and give his life as a ransom – akin to the “guilt offering” of Isaiah 53:10. Ladd suggests, drawing together the third and fourth, that Jesus reinterprets Daniel’s figure so that “the Son of Man is not only a heavenly, pre-existent being; he appears in weakness and humility as a man among human beings to fulfil a destiny of suffering and death...pouring the Suffering Servant into the Son of Man concept”¹. I find this a key response to the essay question, as New Testament writers would be fully aware of these aspects of the Son of Man in writing about Jesus. It is much more satisfactory than views such as Fuller’s who² that Son of Man is an office Jesus is destined to fill following his earthly activity – he is “not yet the Son of Man (which is essentially a triumphant figure) but he acts as the one destined to be so during his ministry and humiliation”.

A final key aspect is Jesus’ referring to God as his Father, even when still a boy ““Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?” “(Luke 2:49). Also in Gethsemane in Matthew 26:39 “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” The Hebrew word “Abba” he used for God (“Daddy”) is unique to him in Scripture.

3 Jesus’ behaviour and status in the Gospels

Beyond his titles, evidence of Jesus’ dual nature is apparent in the description of his behaviour in the Gospels. On the one hand, we can cite a number of examples where he is clearly human, sharing our bodily weaknesses and emotions as for example “I am thirsty” (John 19:28), “Jesus wept” (John 11:35), “Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well” (John 4:6).” He “increased in wisdom” (Luke 2:52) implying a human mind. Furthermore, people near Jesus saw him as a man, as did the residents of Nazareth in Matthew 13:54 ““Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?”” His key difference from mankind was his sinlessness as John 15:10 “I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love”, despite temptation as in the desert. Jesus became a man forever, as for example when he ate food with his disciples by the Lake of Galilee after the Resurrection (John 21:13).

On the other hand, there are also cases where his divine status is clear, for example when he states in Matthew 26:53 “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at

¹ Ladd, p155

² Fuller, 107

my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" He claims divine sovereignty - the right to forgive sins - repeatedly as in Matthew 9:2 "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."" Also there are his divine actions showing omnipotence such as the "kingdom miracle" in Matthew 8:26 "Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm." He is omniscient as when he sees Nathaniel under the fig tree when far away (John 1:48). His immortality is shown by John 2:19 "Destroy this temple and I will raise it up in three days". He accepts to be worshipped as after calming the storm Matthew 14:33 "Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God.""

A related aspect is the virgin birth. By being born of a woman and of God, Jesus' divine and human nature is clearly established. As the angel says to Mary in Luke 1:35 "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." implying Jesus' divine and human parenthood and also his sinlessness (holy). The virgin birth is foreshadowed most directly in texts such as Isaiah 7:14 "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel" (God with us). But by its location it also links to Micah 5:2, which stresses Jesus' pre-existence "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times. "

The best summary of how the two aspects combine, also in the light of Jesus' titles, are set out in the Chalcedonian declaration that there are two distinct natures in Christ that retain their own properties but remain together in one person³. But this is in a sense evident also in the Bible. This explains how Jesus could be wearily asleep in the stern of the boat and then calm the waves. Or his human nature could die on the cross but his divine nature raised him from the dead. Or in his human nature he ascended to heaven but in his divine nature he is present "whenever two or three are gathered together in my name" (Matthew 18:20). I agree with Grudem (1994) what these passages imply is that anything one nature does is done by the person of Christ.

4 Analytical treatments of Jesus' nature

In the Gospels and Epistles we find statements that in a sense analyse Jesus' dual nature. The first lines of John's gospel spell out powerfully Jesus divinity as John 1:1 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." But also there is his humanity as in John 1:14 "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

In Paul's letters, Phil 2:6-9 sees Jesus as both human and divine and seeks to show how the two could coexist over time "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death--even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name". We see this as a declaration of divinity "in very nature God" but also as a man on earth "nature of a servant, being made in human likeness". "Being" God implies that Christ did not give up his divine status on earth but rather acted "made" himself a man taking as the "Son of Man" the position of Isaiah's suffering servant.

³ Grudem, p558

We note that this passage underpins the idea of “two stage Christology” where Jesus is seen, besides the Chalcedonian definition, as undertaking a dynamic movement from a person in humiliation and ultimate death to one resurrected and exalted. I concur with Milne⁴ that it does not support the idea of “kenosis” that Jesus surrendered divine powers and attributes rather than merely divine glory and dignity (see Section 3 above).

Conclusion

I am not convinced that the issue of Jesus’ dual nature is as difficult as some theologians have made out through the centuries. I contend that there is no useful “resolution” to seek beyond what the Bible itself, without evident “struggles”, presents. Notably, by using and exploring the concept of the “Son of Man” it is clear to me what Jesus was and proclaimed himself to be - both divine and human. This is underpinned by his behaviour and status as spelt out in the Gospels. Again, the statements in the Gospels and Epistles set out clearly his dual nature in ways that have served and informed faithful believers for two millennia. That said, the Chalcedonian and “two stage” approaches to Christology can play a role as a protection against error, such as those due to Arius, Apollonius, Nestor and Eutyches. They also emphasise that we need to focus on Jesus’ being and natures (ontological Christianity) rather than just his role in God’s purposes (functional Christianity).

Perhaps by importing views from Greek philosophy and science, theologians have made the issue of Christ’s nature more difficult than it needed to be. They have made it like the crucifixion, as 1 Corinthians 1:23 “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles”. They have sought quasi-scientific precision in areas where our understanding is bound to be limited this side of heaven, as set out in 1 Corinthians 13:9 “For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.” I concur with Milne (p188) that “beyond a certain point, the person of Jesus can only be understood in terms of his own self testimony, which means in terms of the God-breathed witness of Scripture”. As also stated in 1 Corinthians 12:3 “No one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit” but the Holy Spirit uses scripture to reveal the truth to us.

References

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 Ladd G E, (1974) “A theology of the New Testament”, Lutterworth Press, Cambridge
 Milne, Bruce (1998) “Know the truth, second edition”, Inter Varsity Press

Full word count is 2385 words – without scripture references in full circa 1500 words. Note that although these could be omitted, the essay is then less informative to read, revise and reuse as a sermon.

⁴ Milne P 185