

HEAVEN OPENED

INTERTEXTUALITY AND MEANING IN JOHN 1:51

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Summary

John 1:51 presents unique interpretational challenges at a theological level. In this study, the allusion to Jacob's encounter with the LORD at Bethel is the point of departure for an approach which brings together this background with a consideration both of the title Son of Man, and the function of the verse within the gospel. A re-examination of the Bethel narrative casts doubt on the stairway being an image of communication. A Jesus-Jacob nexus arises from a natural reading of John 1:51, and is the interpretational key which unlocks the meaning of the verse. This nexus gives a representative emphasis to the gospel's first Son of Man saying, and the theological connection to the patriarchal promises leads to a conclusion about the identity of the 'greater things' which are promised.

1. Introduction

Let me assure you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.¹

These words of Jesus have challenged interpretation as much as any in the Fourth Gospel. In the words of one scholar, 'in theological terms, the complexity of the saying is almost baffling'.² Yet, they contain the first Johannine Son of Man saying and so are potentially programmatic for understanding the Son of Man motif in the Fourth Gospel as a whole. But what does the saying mean, and what event, or events, does

¹ John 1:51, my translation.

² S. S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (2nd edn; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998): 137.

Jesus speak of here? The clearest allusion is to the account of Jacob's vision of the LORD at Bethel in Genesis 28:

He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.³

This intertextuality provides a basis for many of the interpretations of John 1:51. Many interpreters draw a parallel between Jesus and the stairway, in order to propose Jesus as a connection between earth and heaven. Some link Jesus with the stone at Bethel, and others adopt the position of this paper and link Jesus with Jacob.⁴ Few interpreters adopt an approach which addresses interpretative energy both towards the Genesis 28 intertextuality and the 'Son of Man' motif. Such an approach is described here.

2. Angels Ascending and Descending: Intertextuality with Genesis 28

The intertextuality between Jesus's words in John 1:51 and the Bethel narrative is widely recognised.⁵ Alongside the parallel resonance of angels ascending and descending there is dissonance in the conjunction of τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ('the Son of Man') in John 1:51, referring to Jesus, and ἐπ' αὐτῆς ('on it') in Genesis 28:12 LXX, which refers to the ladder or stairway.⁶ What cognitive correspondence exists between a stairway and a human being? This question is the key point of departure in examining this intertextuality. The Hebrew text of Genesis 28:12 offers a possible resolution. The preposition בִּי ('on it') in the phrase 'the angels of God were ascending and descending on it' is masculine. In the LXX, בִּי is translated by ἐπ' αὐτῆς, which reflects a particular interpretative decision: that בִּי refers back to the stairway (סִלָּם). However, the stairway is not the only masculine subject in the

³ Gen. 28: 12, New International Version.

⁴ For those proposing these alternatives, see B. E. Reynolds, *The Apocalyptic Son of Man in the Gospel of John* (WUNT; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008): 96.

⁵ For J. F. McHugh, *John 1–4: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009): 165, 168, there is a consensus on this—it is 'unmistakable'. For R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971): 105, the allusion cannot be in doubt. J. R. Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010): 136, stands out in thinking there may be no such allusion.

⁶ The pronoun αὐτῆς is singular and feminine, which must refer to the stairway (κλίμαξ, singular, feminine).

narrative. The other is Jacob himself, and it is grammatically entirely possible that **בֵּי** refers to him. Whilst **בֵּי** can mean ‘in’ or ‘into’, it also conveys a much wider range of meaning, including spatial variants of ‘on’, which include ‘upon’ or ‘down to’.⁷ Thus, the text could be portraying angels ascending and then descending upon (or down to) Jacob.

Significant support for this possibility is found in the targums. Three versions of the Palestinian targums take Jacob as the destination and focus for the angelic movement.⁸ For example in *Pseudo Jonathan* we read:

So the rest of the holy angels of the LORD descended to look *on him*

Neofiti I and *Fragment Targum* both read as follows:

And behold angels from before the LORD were ascending and descending and looking *on him*

These readings reflect the idea that the angelic movement was between Jacob and the throne of God, because Jacob’s likeness or image (εἰκών) was fixed on God’s throne. Only *Targum Onkelos* omits the references to the εἰκών of Jacob and understands the Hebrew in the same way as the LXX translator. This targumic tradition forms an essential part of the background to a correct understanding of John 1:51, representing as it does a broadly contemporaneous interpretation where Jacob is the destination for the angelic movement.⁹ Of course, it is by no means certain that these written traditions existed during the early part of the first century.¹⁰ That said, the appearances of the tradition in *b. Hullin* 91b and in *b. Rabba* 68:12 do demonstrate that such an interpretation was widespread by the second century.¹¹ It is important to recognise that it is not *required* that the targumic tradition be the direct basis for the logion. The point to be emphasised is that the

⁷ BDB lists positional uses (‘in’, ‘on’, ‘among’, ‘at’, ‘within’, ‘into’, ‘to’, ‘upon’, ‘on’), proximate uses (‘at’, ‘by’, ‘against’, ‘down to’, ‘upon’); uses portraying accompaniment (‘with’).

⁸ E. G. Clarke, ‘Jacob’s dream at Bethel as interpreted in the targums and the New Testament’, *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, 4/4 (1974–1975): 367–77.

⁹ J. H. C. Neeb, ‘Jacob/Jesus typology in John 1:51’, *Proceedings (Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Societies)* 12 (1992): 83–89, esp. 84.

¹⁰ C. Rowland, ‘John 1.51, Jewish Apocalyptic and Targumic Tradition’, *NTS* 30 (1984): 498–507, esp. 502–503, argues for an early dating; Clarke, ‘Jacob’s dream at Bethel’, 370–75, that targumic traditions underlie John 1.51.

¹¹ Rowland, ‘John 1.51, Jewish Apocalyptic and Targumic Tradition’, 502, 507n15.

possibility of identifying Jacob as the focus of the angelic movement is both suggested by the narrative and present within the Hebrew text itself—it is this very possibility that underlies the targumic tradition.¹²

Whilst some understand both these targumic traditions and John 1:51 as examples of Rabbinic misreading of the Bethel narrative, the Hebrew text itself may indicate that the author envisaged Jacob as the focus of the angelic movement.¹³ In Genesis 28:13, the phrase ‘And behold, the LORD stood above it/him (עָלָיו)’ is frequently interpreted not as a reference to the stairway, but to Jacob. The LORD is here portrayed as standing either ‘over’ or ‘beside’ Jacob, rather than ‘above’ the stairway. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the same verb and preposition consistently mean to stand *beside* something.¹⁴ In fact, the *niphal* form of the verb ‘to stand’ (נָצַב) used here indicates that this ought to be the case: its use for ‘taking a stand’ and its derivatives suggest a physical position of firmness more suitable for a figure standing on earth than for a figure positioned in the sky above a stairway.¹⁵ Other patriarchal theophanic encounters also suggest the LORD standing beside the visited person.¹⁶ Genesis 28:13 is directly relevant because if the suffix on עָלָיו refers to Jacob then this reinforces the possibility of a similar referent for the suffix on בּוֹ in verse 12. In verse 13 it is simply the proximity of עָלָיו to the divine speech that more readily suggests a reference to *Jacob*.¹⁷ In passing, we may address Gordon Wenham’s objections to reading the suffix as a reference to Jacob.¹⁸ First, he appeals to the suffixes in verse 12 which he thinks refer to the stairway. However, this is a circular argument; we have argued that these suffixes may also refer to Jacob. Second, he writes that ‘the vision is described through Jacob’s eyes, so “over me”

¹² This point requires emphasis because interpreters recognising the targumic tradition tend to import the tradition (including the εἰκὼν of Jacob) wholesale into the interpretation of John 1:51.

¹³ See, for example, C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (2nd edn; London: SPCK, 1978): 187.

¹⁴ J. H. Walton, *Genesis* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001): 571 n. 6, emphasis added.

¹⁵ BDB, 5324; *TWOT*, 1398.

¹⁶ Gen. 17:22; 35:13.

¹⁷ V. P. Hamilton, *Genesis 18–50* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995): 240–41. Also T. E. Fretheim, *Genesis* (NIB; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994): 541; H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997): 310. N. Sarna, *Genesis* (JPS Torah; Philadelphia, 1989): 198, also adopts the translation ‘beside him’ in v. 13.

¹⁸ G. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1994): 222.

might be expected, if Jacob was the referent'. However, this assertion is incorrect: the vision is narrated in the third person and so 'beside him' is entirely appropriate. Third, Wenham asserts that the vision of the LORD at the top of the stairway forms the most fitting climax to the narrative, but the climax is in fact the divine speech, and the appearance of the LORD 'beside' Jacob is both attested in other encounters and far more fitting. Wenham's objections are therefore not substantial. If in fact both suffixes do refer to Jacob, then we can offer the following translation of Genesis 28:12-13:

He had a dream, and behold, a stairway was set on earth with its top reaching to the sky; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending down to him. And behold, the LORD stood beside him and said, 'I am the LORD...'

This interpretation results in a visual structure for the dream that reinforces the narrative's emphasis on Jacob. However, this shift in emphasis then raises questions that have long puzzled interpreters: what is the significance of the stairway (סֹלֶם) and of the associated ascending and descending of the angels? If the LORD stands *beside* Jacob, then the stairway does not function as a channel of communication between Jacob and God.¹⁹ Old Testament scholarship has long proposed that סֹלֶם refers to a ramp or stairway, probably of a tower, or ziggurat.²⁰ Since 'heavens' (שָׁמַיִם) can refer to the sky, the vision may in fact be of a very high ziggurat or similar structure.²¹ It may also be the case that the סֹלֶם or ramp is part of the hill on which Jacob sleeps. So, Jacob is sleeping *on* the סֹלֶם, rising ground which is part of a cosmic mountain, a mountain understood in ancient Near Eastern mythology as a meeting place of heaven and earth.²² This

¹⁹ Sarna, *Genesis*, 198; *Contra* Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 221 and Hamilton, *Genesis 18–50*, 240. The latter sees in the narrative the LORD descending on the stairway, although this is nowhere stated.

²⁰ סֹלֶם is a *hapax legomenon* and may be derived from סָלַל, suggesting a ramp or similar structure (Waltke, Von Rad, Fretheim), or from the Akkadian *simmiltu*, suggesting a stairway (Hamilton, Gunkel, Houtman). Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001): 390, and Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982): 243, envisage the ramp of a ziggurat. This interpretation is well established, having been proposed in the late nineteenth century.

²¹ Gen. 4:11.

²² C. Houtman, 'What did Jacob see in his dream at Bethel? Some remarks on Genesis 28:10-22', *Vetus Testamentum* 27/3 (1977): 337-51, esp. 337-38. Houtman's observation that in *Midrash Rabbah* סֹלֶם could function as a symbol of Mount Sinai is pertinent. On Cosmic Mountains, see R. J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

suggestion ties in with Bethel's later designation as a High Place, and helps to explain why Jacob has been sleeping *in* the abode of God.²³ On balance though, the text suggests that Jacob perceives a very high ziggurat, alive with moving angels. Commenting on the nature of cloud-like theophanic revelations, Meredith Kline writes:

To describe the action of the Glory-cloud by the figure of outspread wings was natural, not simply because of the overshadowing function which it performed, but because of the composition of this theophanic cloud. For when prophetic vision penetrates the thick darkness, the cloud is seen to be alive with winged creatures, with cherubim and seraphim. The sound of its coming is, in the prophetic idiom, the sound of their wings.²⁴

Kline supports this with references to Ezekiel's prophetic visions. The movement of angels observed by Jacob may be associated with this type of theophanic glory-cloud. In fact, tying the visual elements together, the very appearance of such a towering glory-cloud might suggest a high ziggurat-like structure reaching into the sky. The movement of angels within the cloud might be interpreted as their climbing and descending this structure. In any case, it would seem that the stairway is not an image of communication between heaven and earth, but is rather a *theophanic phenomenon* which functions as a precursor to the appearance of the LORD himself, and more particularly to the divine speech, just as in Ezekiel and elsewhere.²⁵

3. Jacob, Theophany and Promise

Walter Brueggemann notes that in such encounters there are often two elements, the visual and the auditory. While the former may fascinate us, the point of exposition must be the speech.²⁶ The ultimate significance of the Bethel encounter is found in the striking correspondence between the words spoken by the LORD to Jacob in Genesis 28:13-16a and those spoken to Abram in Genesis 12, 13, and

²³ 1 Kgs 12:29; Gen. 28:16-17.

²⁴ M. G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1998): 14.

²⁵ If the image is one of communication from heaven then 'descending and ascending' angels might be expected. Michaels, *Gospel*, 136, amongst others, puzzles over this. In our interpretation, the order of movement is not important.

²⁶ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 244.

15.²⁷ Common to all is the formula of: (1) the LORD as the God who will be present with the recipients of the divine speech; (2) the land to be given; (3) blessings and numeric strength of progeny; and (4) the priestly role of recipient and progeny in blessing the world. Some elements are also present in the words spoken by the LORD to Isaac at Beersheba in Genesis 26:24. Isaac's own encounter with the LORD functions as a divine restatement of the promises given to Abraham. Here in the Bethel narrative, we have a much fuller restatement of these promises to Jacob. In theological terms, David Clines casts the promises to the patriarchs as 'an affirmation of the primal divine intentions for humanity'.²⁸ If the promises are understood in this way, then Jacob's encounter with the LORD takes on a deeper significance. Jacob, renamed as the father and embodiment (and therefore the representative) of the nation of Israel, receives a reaffirmation of the LORD's primal intentions for humanity, rooted in the Abrahamic promise and, beyond that, anchored in the creation blessings of Genesis 1.²⁹

We may now reconsider Jesus's statement in John 1:51. In Genesis 28, the angelic movement is focused upon Jacob. In Jesus's statement, we find that Jacob is replaced by the Son of Man.

And he said to them: Let me assure you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.³⁰

Like the Hebrew **עַל**, the preposition ἐπὶ in the phrase 'upon (ἐπὶ) the Son of Man (τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου)' has a broad semantic range. In the accusative, it may mean 'on' or 'upon', but may also mean 'over', 'about' or 'towards'.³¹ These latter alternatives ought to be in view—as in the case of Jacob, the angels are envisaged ascending and descending upon, or towards, the Son of Man. What we find is not a strained correspondence between Jesus and a stairway, but direct correspondence between two human figures: Jacob and Jesus. This is the most natural reading and, if this is an authentic logion, this connection would have most readily offered itself to the disciples. To

²⁷ There is particular correspondence with the words spoken to Abram in Gen. 13:14-16.

²⁸ D. J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (2nd edn; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997): 30.

²⁹ Waltke, *Genesis*, 390, sees theological correspondence between Bethel and Eden.

³⁰ John 1:51, my translation.

³¹ BAGD, 2922.

propose that they assumed a correlation between Jesus and the stairway presents a significant problem: it requires first-century Galileans (including Jesus himself) to have envisaged a gargantuan human colossus, reaching into the clouds, his body covered with travelling angels using it as a conduit for their journeys. There is no evidence that such bizarre imagery would have been anything other than totally alien to any Galilean. In fact, Jesus is simply portraying himself in the place of Jacob.³² Before we consider the significance of his evocation of the Bethel event, we will first consider the title Jesus uses: The Son of Man.

4. Son of Man: The Background, the Fourth Gospel and the Man

The debate surrounding the phrase ‘son of man’ is complex and long-running, and the debate about the Johannine use of the term has existed in some isolation from that concerning its use in the synoptics. We cannot rehearse the debate here, and the whole subject requires some caution.³³ However, we must address the use of the title the Son of Man in John 1:51. There are two features that provide an initial direction for our brief exploration, one from our conclusions drawn from intertextuality with the Bethel narrative, and the other from the context of the verse. First, the context of John 1:51 is one which is strongly messianic. The titles used of Jesus in the preceding verses all emphasise in one way or other, his humanity—Jesus as the promised human deliverer.³⁴ Second, the identification of Jesus with Jacob (a correlation that again rests on Jesus’s humanity) suggests that Jacob’s own representative role in the Bethel narrative may be significant.

4.1 Son of Man in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, ‘son of man’ occurs a total of 108 times. Of these, thirteen exist in parallelisms which demonstrate equivalence to

³² This is in fact an ancient view, essentially found in Caesarius of Arles. See M. Sheridan, ed., *Genesis 12–50* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Vol. 2; Downers Grove: IVP, 2002): 189.

³³ For brief surveys of the Johannine Son of Man, see McHugh, *John 1–4*, 170-75; Reynolds, *Apocalyptic Son of Man*, 2-9. Also see C. Caragounis’s survey, *The Son of Man: Vision and Interpretation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986): 9-33.

³⁴ Reynolds, *Apocalyptic Son of Man*, 91-92.

‘man’ or ‘human’.³⁵ In these instances, the term בן־אדם (*ben ’adam*, i.e. ‘son of man’) is generally used, the phrase is always anarthrous and it is generally translated in the LXX by υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου.³⁶ Of the remaining ninety-five occurrences, all but two are in Ezekiel, where בן־אדם occurs ninety-three times without parallelism, being the title with which Ezekiel is addressed by God throughout the prophetic revelations of the book. The Hebrew is consistently translated with υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου in the LXX. The phrase is first introduced in the context of Ezekiel’s vision which, as in Genesis 28, sets the scene for the divine speech to him: ‘Son of man, stand on your feet that I may speak with you.’³⁷ Again, the phrase emphasises the humanity of Ezekiel—we may think of it as the LORD addressing Ezekiel as ‘Human!’³⁸ However, there is perhaps a greater significance to be attached. Iain Duguid notes that God’s designation for Ezekiel contrasts with that for the people, בני־ישראל (*bene-yisrael*, i.e. ‘sons of Israel’).³⁹ This singling out of Ezekiel is for Duguid a reflection of Ezekiel’s receptivity to God, which evokes the Edenic relationship, and is an aspect of the re-creation theme in the prophecy. The re-creation of Israel is thus prefigured in the prophet: ‘Ezekiel himself is to be *the founding member* of a new community, empowered by the infusion of the divine Spirit to a life of radical obedience.’⁴⁰ So, Duguid ascribes a representative function to בן־אדם, as does Walter Eichrodt, who writes, ‘What the entire people should achieve is to be realized in the one son of man who is their representative.’⁴¹ This same usage is also seen in Daniel 8:17 where Daniel is addressed by the LORD as בן־אדם in the same manner, and again the LXX translates this using the vocative υἱὲ ἀνθρώπου.

³⁵ These occurrences are Job 25:6; Ps. 8:5; Isa. 51:12; 56:2 (where they parallel אנוש); Num. 23:19; Job 35:8; Ps. 80:18; Jer. 49:18, 33; 50:40; 51:43 (all paralleling איש); Ps. 144:3 (parallelism with אדם); Job 16:21 (in parallelism with גבר). All of these use the term בן־אדם (*ben ’adam*), with the sole exception of Ps. 144:3, which uses בן־אנוש (*ben ’enosh*).

³⁶ The only exception is Isa. 56:2 (בן־אדם translated with ἄνθρωπος). Of significance amongst these is the instance in Ps. 80:18 MT, where the referent of ‘son of man’ is the Israelite king.

³⁷ Ezek. 2:1.

³⁸ This is a consequence of the vocative form. See W. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel* (London: SCM, 1970): 61.

³⁹ I. Duguid, *Ezekiel* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999): 69.

⁴⁰ Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 69, emphasis added.

⁴¹ Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 64.

The single remaining OT use of ‘son of man’ is the well known and frequently discussed instance in Daniel 7:13. Daniel, whilst beholding a theophany that includes a cloud of ‘thousands and thousands’ of angels, sees a figure approach the LORD. This figure, attended by the ‘clouds of heaven’, is presented before the LORD and given ‘dominion, glory, and a kingdom’. The figure is described as ‘like a son of man’. Here, we have an Aramaic term **בֶּר אִנְשׁ**, which is also translated with **υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου** in the LXX. We must note that what Daniel sees is not *the* son of man or *a* son of man, but one *like* a son of man (**כְּבֶר אִנְשׁ**). The phrase describes the human-like form of the figure that Daniel sees in his vision.⁴² Interpreters have widely identified the figure as messianic—he receives an everlasting kingdom and is served by all the nations—his rule is akin to that exercised by the LORD himself. The figure is interpreted in Daniel 7:18, by implication, as representing ‘the holy ones of the highest one’. This collective representation is not inconsistent with such a kingly figure, who is both an individual and the representative of his people. Hence in all 108 instances of ‘son of man’ in the OT the term is an idiom meaning ‘a man’ or ‘a human’ and often emphasises the humanity of the one referred to. In some instances, especially with Ezekiel and the Danielic figure, the phrase ‘son of man’ also carries a representative nuance.

4.2 Son of Man in the Similitudes of Enoch

Much of the Son of Man debate revolves around attempts to solve the mystery of how the use of this OT idiom becomes a title: The Son of Man.⁴³ The use of ‘son of man’ in three passages of the apocalyptic work *1 Enoch* is often claimed to furnish evidence that the idiomatic use of ‘son of man’ in Daniel becomes personified as a distinctive character, *the* Son of Man.⁴⁴ It is definitely the case that in *1 Enoch* the one *like* a son of man becomes *a* son of man (a human being). However, that he also becomes the Son of Man in a titular sense is not a clear inference. For example, *1 Enoch* 46:3 is usually translated as

⁴² Hence the NEB’s ‘like a man’.

⁴³ My capitalisation of The Son of Man is deliberate, to emphasise its titular, rather than idiomatic, form.

⁴⁴ See *1 Enoch* 46:1-4; *1 Enoch* 47:3-48:6; *1 Enoch* 71:9-14. S. Chialà, ‘The Son of Man: The Evolution of an Expression’ in *Enoch and the Messiah Son of Man*, ed. G. Boccaccini (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007): 153-78, esp. 160.

‘This is the Son of Man, to whom belongs righteousness.’⁴⁵ However, the article does not exist in Ethiopic and so the translation, ‘This is a son of man (i.e. a man) to whom belongs righteousness’ is just as valid.⁴⁶ In fact, when all of the instances of ‘son of man’ in *1 Enoch* are examined, it can be seen that the translation of ‘a man’, ‘this man’ or ‘that man’ is valid in every case. Nevertheless, the figure in *1 Enoch* does appear to be identified with the ‘Elect One’, who is also referred to as Messiah.⁴⁷ Therefore, as in Daniel 7, the figure seems to have a definite messianic association, but the evidence that ‘son of man’ has become a title is far from persuasive.⁴⁸

4.3 The Aramaic Idiom

Recent debate surrounding the synoptic, if not the Johannine, Son of Man has been dominated by studies of the Aramaic idiom that we find in Daniel 7:13.⁴⁹ Whilst it is unusual to include such debate in a Johannine context, the similarities between the synoptic and Johannine portraits provoke reference to it here.⁵⁰ If we accept Jesus’s use of the term as authentic, then its appearance in all four Gospels has a common genesis. The Aramaic idiom for ‘man’ (בר (א)נש) would have been well known to Jesus. There is an important issue, however, with respect to the use of the idiom in its definite state (בר (א)נשא), i.e. ‘The Son of Man’) or indefinite state (בר (א)נש), i.e. ‘a son of man’. Maurice Casey has attempted to demonstrate that both forms of the idiom are employed with no obvious variation in essential meaning: both forms mean ‘a son of man’.⁵¹ Casey then goes on to propose that Jesus used

⁴⁵ Chialà, ‘Son of Man’, 159, following J. H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Vol. 1* (New York: Doubleday, 1983): 34.

⁴⁶ Chialà, ‘Son of Man’, 160.

⁴⁷ C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: CUP, 1953): 242.

⁴⁸ P. L. Owen, ‘Problems with Casey’s Solution’ in “*Who Is This Son of Man?*”: *The Latest Scholarship on a Puzzling Expression of the Historical Jesus*, ed. Larry W. Hurtado and Paul L. Owen (LNTS 390; London: T&T Clark, 2011): 28-49, esp. 47-48, also deals with the use of the idiom in 4 Ezra and Ezekiel the Tragedian, which we cannot address here.

⁴⁹ A recent survey of this debate can be found in A. L. Lukaszewski, ‘Issues Concerning the Aramaic Behind ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου: A Critical Review of Scholarship’ in “*Who Is This Son of Man?*”, ed. Hurtado and Owen, 1-27, esp. 7-13.

⁵⁰ B. E. Reynolds, ‘The Use of the Son of Man Idiom in the Gospel of John’ in “*Who Is This Son of Man?*”, ed. Hurtado and Owen, 101-29, esp. 102-103.

⁵¹ M. Casey, *The Solution to the Son of Man Problem* (London: T&T Clark, 2009): 42, 67-81.

the definite form, meaning a son of man, but that this was later misunderstood as a title, the Son of Man. The definite Aramaic idiom, Casey argues, would be most naturally translated into Greek as ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου even if the translator knew that the idiom was a general statement about human beings.⁵² He argues that, once written down in Greek, the phrase could then be misunderstood as a title: ‘the shift of meaning has taken place with the transmission of the saying from Aramaic into Greek’.⁵³ However, Casey’s views have been strongly challenged in work by Paul Owen and David Shepherd, who demonstrate that the definite term is not found at all in middle Aramaic, only in later Aramaic.⁵⁴ Owen and Shepherd’s work implies that if Jesus himself used the definite term, then this in itself was an innovation. The Greek translation adopted consistently in the gospels for Jesus’s self-designation, ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, places emphasis on the article—the Son of Man. It is surely of great significance that the LXX has translated בן אֱנוֹשׁ, בן אָדָם and, most significantly, בַּר אַנְשָׁא in every case (bar one) with the anarthrous term υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου.⁵⁵ This translation would have offered itself most readily to the authors and compilers of the traditions behind the gospels, if Jesus had been understood as speaking of ‘a son of man’. A definite departure has been made in the use of ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.⁵⁶ John 5:27 is especially cogent here, being the only anarthrous use of ‘son of man’ in the Fourth Gospel, a use that directly corresponds with the LXX. In this verse, Jesus speaks of the Father giving authority to the Son of God to execute judgement because he is *a* man, a human (ὅτι υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου ἐστίν).⁵⁷ This anarthrous use of the term is distinct from the form more usually attributed to Jesus. Therefore, the unusual

⁵² To attempt to justify this, Casey, *Solution*, 253-66, proposes a detailed (yet speculative) translation strategy.

⁵³ Casey, *Solution*, 35-37.

⁵⁴ P. L. Owen & D. Shepherd, ‘Speaking Up for Qumran, Dalman and the Son of Man: Was Bar Enasha a Common Term for “Man” in the Time of Jesus?’, *JSNT* 81 (2001): 81-122; P. L. Owen, ‘Problems’, 28-49.

⁵⁵ The only exception is a translation of ἀνθρώπος, see note 33 above.

⁵⁶ Casey, *Solution*, 251-52, 258, notes the point about the LXX translation in passing, but still insists that the decision to render בַּר אֱנוֹשׁ with ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου in the Gospels is ‘wholly in accordance with the known habits of translators in their culture’. He does not directly address why the precedent of the LXX was not followed.

⁵⁷ Cf. Acts 17:31. Casey, *Solution*, 292, acknowledges that this is a reference to the humanity of Jesus, but for Casey so is the articular form of the phrase. Thus Casey fails to see any significance in the variation.

Greek ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου almost certainly reflects a specific use of the Aramaic idiom in a *definite* form: Jesus specifically refers to himself, not as בר (א)נש, but as בר (א)נשא. Even if Casey is correct, and given Shepherd's and Owen's work it is a big 'if', there surely must have been a way for Jesus to verbally emphasise the phrase, such that his intent of supplying a definite sense could not be mistaken.⁵⁸ Jesus placed a unique emphasis on the idiom to speak about himself not as *a* man, but as *the* Man. This would be his hearer's most natural interpretation of this innovative use of the idiom. The decision of the translators to use the Greek articles in a deliberate departure from the LXX reflects Jesus's own use of the Aramaic idiom in definite form.⁵⁹

4.4 *The Son of Man as the Man in the Fourth Gospel*

The proposal that Jesus would deploy a well known idiom in an innovative manner to invest it with new significance ought not to be problematic. N. T. Wright argues that the Christian use of the term 'The Son of Man' is such an enormous development that the only sufficiently robust context for its origin is the ministry of Jesus himself.⁶⁰ The title, like the idiom, emphasises Jesus's humanity—but 'The Man' adds an additional nuance of representation.⁶¹ The first Johannine use in John 1:51 is programmatic, intended to highlight the content of the title 'The Son of Man' through the direct correlation of Jesus and Jacob, the representative and father of Israel. This representative role of the title *the* Son of Man also finds a faint echo in the use of כִּבְר אֱנִשׁ בֶּן אָדָם in Ezekiel, and in the portrayal of the one כִּבְר אֱנִשׁ in Daniel.

This proposal stands apart from the three existing major alternatives for the source of the title the Son of Man. As they are termed by Paul

⁵⁸ P. J. Williams, 'Expressing Definiteness in Aramaic: A Response to Casey's Theory Concerning the Son of Man Sayings' in *Who Is This Son of Man?*, Hurtado and Owen, 61-77, esp. 73-76. Casey, *Solution*, 47, may speculate that the prosthetic א was not pronounced, but this is *mere* speculation. It seems strange to argue that there was no available verbal emphasis for Jesus to speak specifically of himself as *the* Son of Man.

⁵⁹ This is the position of D. Shepherd, "Re-Solving the Son of Man 'Problem' in Aramaic" in Hurtado and Owen, *Who Is This Son of Man?*, 50-60. B. Lindars, *Jesus, Son of Man* (London: SPCK, 1983): 24, also argues for Jesus's use of the definite state of the idiom.

⁶⁰ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996): 519.

⁶¹ Casey, *Solution*, 263-64, acknowledges the meaning 'the son of humankind' for the interpreted phrase ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, but not for Jesus's original usage. Note also the CEB's translation of 'Son of Man' as 'human one.'

Owen they are: the Bultmann, the Jeremias, and the Dalman hypotheses.⁶² All three of these propose the specific use of the Aramaic idiom in Daniel 7:13 as, in some way, the source of the title the Son of Man. The title is indeed derived from the idiom, but the idiom was far too widespread for the title to be solely derived from its use in Daniel 7:13. In terms of the Johannine evidence, the response to Jesus's question in 9:35 may lend weight to the suggestion that the idiom 'son of man' was in some way associated with the Messiah in Second Temple Judaism (reflecting its use in Daniel and *I Enoch*). It is difficult, however, to proceed from this to the conclusion that the Son of Man was a recognised messianic title, especially in the light of 12:34.⁶³ It is far from clear that there was in Second Temple Judaism a messianic Son of Man concept derived from Daniel or *I Enoch*. The proposal here still allows for a definite messianic association for the Danielic and Enochic figures, but these figures are merely designated through the use of the idiom as human (or human-like) figures. They are, both in the texts and in interpretations in Second Temple Judaism, figures of a developed messiah concept (human, and yet more-than-merely-human figures) and not figures of any latent Son of Man concept.

In the context of the Johannine Son of Man debate, the proposal here accords with those who have already proposed that the title emphasises Jesus's humanity.⁶⁴ The portrait of the Son of Man in the gospel of John consists of three key themes. Firstly, the death of the Son of Man, controlled by the metaphor of Moses and the serpent and allied with the theme of glory (3:14; 8:28; 12:23; 13:31). This is entirely consistent with a title that emphasises humanity. Secondly, the theme of belief in, or participation in, the Son of Man (6:53; 9:35) lends a representative nuance already highlighted in our proposal.⁶⁵

⁶² P. L. Owen, 'Problems', 30.

⁶³ Although it is hard to argue from this that therefore the Son of Man was a recognised messianic title. See Chialà, 'Evolution', 153. Messianic overtones in Daniel may have led to an association of 'one like a son of man' with Messiah, but this does not suggest that this developed into the title the Son of Man.

⁶⁴ For example, C. H. Dodd. This is one of four broad positions listed by Reynolds, 'The Use of the Son of Man Idiom', 104-105. They are that Son of Man: (1) highlights Jesus's humanity; (2) indicates that Jesus is a divine man; (3) is synonymous with Son of God; (4) indicates that Jesus is a heavenly or divine figure.

⁶⁵ Dodd, *Interpretation*, 248, writes, 'the "term Son of Man" throughout this gospel retains the sense of one who incorporates in Himself the people of God, or humanity in its ideal aspect'.

The third theme is the heavenly origin of the Son of Man (3:13; 6:62). This theme has been the foundation for proposing that the Son of Man is a non-human, or at least pre-human, heavenly figure. It may seem to present difficulties for the proposal here.⁶⁶ However, Chalcedonian orthodoxy makes clear that the human Jesus also has an identity that pre-exists his humanity. That the Man has, in some sense, ‘come from heaven’ does not imply that the Man is a title that conveys pre-existence. Indeed, he is only the Man because he has *come* from heaven.⁶⁷

5. Jacob, Jesus, and the Son of Man: The Meaning of John 1:51

It remains to draw these strands together and address the question of the meaning of John 1:51. What is the significance of Jesus’s identification of himself with Jacob? What is the connection between this Jacob-Jesus nexus and the title the Son of Man?

5.1 *Israel and a New Israel*

John Pryor writes that ‘one of the least noticed motifs in John’s Christology is the presentation of Jesus as the embodiment of Israel’.⁶⁸ The vine-imagery of John 15 is one example of Jesus’s self-conceptualisation of his representative role. This, too, is what we encounter in John 1:51. Jesus, in portraying himself in Jacob’s place, does not merely have in view the patriarch as an individual. Just as Jacob represents his descendants before the LORD and gives his name Israel to them, Jesus portrays himself as the representative of a new Israel, a new people of God.⁶⁹ This identification of Jesus with Jacob-Israel also has a background in the synoptic accounts of Jesus’s baptism. These accounts display strong intertextuality with Isaiah 42:1 (the Servant is the ‘chosen one’ of God in whom God delights and

⁶⁶ Reynolds, ‘The Use of the Son of Man Idiom’, 120.

⁶⁷ The so-called ascent/descent Christology rests on a shaky foundation. Our interpretation of John 1:51 removes one of its main pillars; J. W. Pryor, ‘The Johannine Son of Man and the descent-ascent motif’, *JETS* 34/3 (1991): 341-51.

⁶⁸ J. W. Pryor, *John, Evangelist of the Covenant People* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992): 124-25.

⁶⁹ Pryor, *John*, 124. In the portrayal of Jesus’s self-identification with Israel, the Fourth Gospel agrees with the Synoptics, e.g. in the common temptation tradition, the parallels between Jesus and Israel in the wilderness are carefully constructed.

upon whom God places his Spirit) and Jesus is clearly being identified with the Suffering Servant.⁷⁰ In Isaiah 41:8 and 44:1, this same Servant is also identified with Jacob-Israel. These themes converge in Isaiah 42:1 LXX:

Jacob is my servant, I will help him: Israel is my chosen, my soul has accepted him; I have put my Spirit upon him; he shall bring forth judgement to the Gentiles.

The LXX here clearly identifies the Isaianic Servant upon whom the Spirit is given with Jacob-Israel.⁷¹ Thus, a Jesus-Jacob identification is latent in the synoptic treatment of Jesus's baptism. John 1:51 may, in the absence of a baptism narrative, function as the Johannine vehicle for this identification.⁷² Therefore, to answer our first question, the significance of Jesus's self-identification with Jacob is that it portrays Jesus as the originator of a New Israel. In answer to our second question, the title the Son of Man carries the New Israel motif to its *telos*—a New Humanity.⁷³ Charles Dodd approves of C. F. Burney's observation that 'Jacob as the ancestor of the nation of Israel, summarises in his person the ideal Israel *in posse*, just as our Lord, at the end of the line, summarises it *in esse* as the Son of Man.' In commenting on this, Dodd writes:

For John, of course, 'Israel' is not the Jewish nation, but the new humanity, redeemed in Christ, the community of those who are 'of the truth', and of whom Christ is king. In a deeper sense He is not only their king. He is their inclusive representative: they are in Him and He in them.⁷⁴

The Son of Man, the title Jesus appropriates when identifying himself with Jacob at Bethel, expresses Jesus's self-understanding of his being the representative man, the originator of the new humanity.

⁷⁰ Matt. 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22. In Isa. 42:1, the Servant figure has a messianic role in that he brings the restoration of God's order in the world to the nations. On Isa. 42.1, see J. N. Oswalt, *Isaiah 40-66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998): 109-110; B. Childs, *Isaiah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001): 325.

⁷¹ Whilst the MT does not have this direct reference in 42:1, the LXX makes explicit what is implicit in the MT (41:8; 42:1; 44:1).

⁷² Michaels, *Gospel*, 138; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1987): 28; C. S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: Volume 1* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003): 489.

⁷³ See Dodd, *Interpretation*, 246-47 for discussion on the representative role of Jacob, the Isaianic Servant, and the Son of Man.

⁷⁴ Dodd, *Interpretation*, 246 (citing C. F. Burney).

5.2 *Heaven Opened: The Revelation of the Son of Man*

In terms of understanding the logion, one essential question remains: what event does Jesus speak of in John 1:51; what exactly are the ‘greater things’ that the disciples will see? The meaning of the phrase ‘you will see heaven opened’ (ὄψεσθε τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνεωγμένον) is important here. The idea of seeing heaven opened is generally associated with the apocalyptic literature of Second Temple Judaism. Reynolds, in arguing that the Johannine portrayal of the Son of Man is thoroughly apocalyptic, places significant weight on John 1:51.⁷⁵ However, Reynolds may not be correct to so readily identify the theme of unveiling here with the apocalyptic genre. Unveiling is also a key theme of the Bethel narrative. Although there is no explicit reference to τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνεωγμένον in Genesis 28, Jacob does refer to the ‘gate of heaven’ (שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמַיִם) and clearly expresses that at Bethel the divide between the realm inhabited by the LORD and the world of human beings has been breached.⁷⁶ This has taken place in order to facilitate Jacob’s meeting with the LORD. Indeed, as we have seen, Jacob’s conviction of God’s presence and his consequent naming of Bethel demonstrate his belief that he was asleep *in* the abode of the LORD.⁷⁷ In apocalyptic the opening of heaven facilitates the seer’s vision into a hidden realm; in Genesis 28 the gate of heaven is opened so that the LORD himself can bring a message of promise into the human world.⁷⁸ As such, ‘the gate of heaven’ and ‘the heavens opened’ are conceptual parallels, but in this case have a rather different thrust than in apocalyptic literature. An ‘opened heaven’ has a much broader association than merely with Second Temple apocalyptic.⁷⁹ So, how are we to understand exactly what the disciples will *see*? Here we must note an important point. Some interpreters place Nathaniel and the

⁷⁵ Reynolds, *Apocalyptic Son of Man*, 90, 92-95.

⁷⁶ However, Urban von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John*: v. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011): 66, thinks it probable that ὄψεσθε τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνεωγμένον is part of the evocation of the Bethel narrative.

⁷⁷ Gen. 28:16. See note 19 above.

⁷⁸ Whereas Reynolds, ‘The Use of the Son of Man Idiom’, 114 emphasises that an opened heaven allows sight into heaven. This is not what happens at Bethel, neither is it what happens in the gospel of John in fulfilment of John 1:51.

⁷⁹ As Reynolds, *Apocalyptic Son of Man*, 93 acknowledges. In the OT, the LORD opens the heavens to give rain (Deut. 28:12; 2 Kgs 7:2, 19): fruitfulness (Mal. 3:10) and, more significantly, to come down (Isa. 64:1). Throughout the OT, the LORD sends rain, fire, food and blessings, and speaks from heaven much more frequently than anyone looks into heaven.

disciples in the place of Jacob, so that they will see what Jacob dreamt.⁸⁰ Reynolds believes that the ‘opened heaven’ motif implies that the Son of Man is a heavenly figure because only an ‘opened heaven’ makes the vision of the Son of Man possible.⁸¹ However, since Jesus is portraying himself in the place of Jacob, he is in fact placing the disciples at a different vantage point: they themselves will observe a recapitulation of the Bethel event. William Walker finds no evidence that what is promised here is ever fulfilled.⁸² However, Jesus’s words are most naturally taken as evoking the significance, rather than the circumstances, of the Bethel event. In the Bethel narrative the reader observes the LORD designating Jacob as the inheritor of the Abrahamic promises and restating them to him; the disciples will see the LORD designating Jesus as the inheritor of the Abrahamic promises and restating them to him.⁸³ The circumstances are different, but the significance is the same. The ‘opened heaven’ does not allow a vision of the Son of Man, but the *designation* of the Son of Man.⁸⁴

Where in the Fourth Gospel do we observe this? It is here that literary structure is significant. The logion in John 1:51 is immediately juxtaposed with the ‘beginning of the signs’ (ἀρχὴν τῶν σημείων) which takes place at the wedding in Cana.⁸⁵ The Book of Signs (1:19–12:50) encompasses the entire public ministry of Jesus and emphasises the signs accompanying it.⁸⁶ In the synoptic gospels the miracles of Jesus are regularly referred to as ‘mighty deeds’ (δυνάμεις), whereas in the Fourth Gospel they regularly become signs (σημεῖα). Signs, or designations, are clearly important in the Fourth Gospel and fundamental to its purpose. Our interpretation of John 1:51 provides

⁸⁰ For example, Augustine, Sermon XXXIX; J. H. Neyrey, ‘The Jacob Allusions in John 1:51’, *CBQ* 44/4 (1982): 586-605, esp. 589-90.

⁸¹ Reynolds, *Apocalyptic Son of Man*, 95.

⁸² W. O. Walker, ‘John 1:43-51 and “The Son of Man” in the Fourth Gospel’, *JSNT* 56 (1994): 31-42, esp. 38.

⁸³ McHugh, *John 1-4*, 168-69, is one of the few commentators to make any connection to the Abrahamic promises here.

⁸⁴ Of special importance here again are the synoptic accounts of the baptism of Jesus, where the heavens are again opened, but not to permit sight into heaven but designation of Jesus *from* heaven (Matt. 3:16; Luke 3:21). The Fourth Gospel has no direct account of Jesus’s baptism, but there is an opened heaven in John 1:51.

⁸⁵ S. S. Kim, ‘The Relationship of John 1:19-51 to the Book of Signs in John 2-12’, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165 (2008): 323-37.

⁸⁶ The extent of the Book of Signs is disputed. Although some interpreters want to create a structural division at 2:1, such a division obscures the continuity created by the chronological framework uniting 1:19 through 2:11.

insight into the much debated meaning and role of these designations. The miracles presented in the Book of Signs appear to have been carefully selected from the much broader collection portrayed in the synoptics and, of course, there are some which are exclusive to the Fourth Gospel.⁸⁷ The six signs can be categorised as miracles of provision (wine and food in abundance, as symbols of fruitfulness), and of healing (including the ultimate healing of death itself). We may now recall the theological significance of the promises to the patriarchs as suggested by Clines. In the aftermath of the fall, the promises represent ‘an affirmation of the primal divine intentions for humanity’. This affirmation of the primal divine intentions for humanity (for life, rather than death, and for the fruitfulness of creation, rather than the cursed ground) is what is found in the Book of Signs. Jesus is portrayed as the one who receives the reality of these promises, and the signs of the Fourth Gospel represent the inbreaking of this reality into history.⁸⁸ Thus, Jesus assures Nathanael and Philip that they will see ‘greater things’: Jesus’s own designation by God as the embodiment and representative of a New Israel, the representative and father of a New Humanity, and the inheritor of the reality of the promises of redemption given to the patriarchs. At Bethel, Jacob’s designation was accompanied by theophanic signs accompanying the presence of the LORD on earth. The designation of Jesus is accomplished through the σημεῖα which he works by the authority of his Father and by the power of the Spirit, which themselves show the presence of the LORD in his creation, and his intent to redeem it.⁸⁹

6. Conclusion

Jesus’s words in John 1:51 are the climax of the first narrative section of the Fourth Gospel and form a transition to the beginning of signs in the ministry of Jesus. The words recall the experience of Jacob at

⁸⁷ Several dozen are recounted in the Synoptics. The six Johannine signs are: provision of wine (2:1-11); healing of the royal official’s son (4:46-54); healing at the pool of Bethesda (5:1-9); provision of food (6:1-13); healing of the man born blind (9:1-12); and raising of Lazarus (11:1-44).

⁸⁸ Note that the perfect participle form ἀνεργότα allows for an ongoing testimony of the signs to Jesus.

⁸⁹ A. J. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004): 87; H. N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997): 95; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 28.

Bethel, cast in such a way as to indicate a recapitulation of that event, but with Jesus himself taking the place of Jacob. Jesus here conceives of himself as a New Israel. That the New Israel embraces all nations is seen in Jesus's self-reference as the Son of Man, indicating his self-understanding as the representative of a New Humanity. The foremost significance of the Abrahamic promises in Jacob's Bethel encounter must be carried into Jesus's evocation of this event. The 'greater things' that the disciples see are the signs of the Book of Signs, which designate Jesus himself as the Man who inherits the reality of the Abrahamic promises for humanity. This particular insight enriches our understanding of Jesus as the Son of Man.