

# “Who Do Men Say That I Am?” –

## Psalm 8 and the Humanity of Christ

Timothy Radcliffe O P

The evangelists obviously assume that Jesus was a human being. What is less clear is what would be entailed by that assumption. There is very little in the New Testament that we would immediately recognise as an explicit exploration of the significance of Jesus' humanity. It is often assumed that this is because the authors of the New Testament were philosophically naive and so did not have a developed conception of what it meant to be a human being, but maybe it is because we pose the question in the context of a discipline called Christology which predisposes us to accept as valid only certain ways of thinking.

Cornelius Ernst O P, in a provocative article called “Thinking about Jesus”, said, “the 'ology termination (of Christology) does presuppose a certain kind of abstraction, a certain kind of theoretical approach, a certain conception of what constitutes reasonableness, and in fact what is meaning at all, what constitutes thinking. I think one of the problems we have to face today is just what *does* constitute rationality, what *is* thinking, what *are* the appropriate categories, not only for thinking about Jesus Christ, but about anything else”.<sup>1</sup> The assumption within Christology has generally been that to claim that Jesus is a human being is to say *what* he is, to identify him as belonging to a particular class of beings, a species. And one's membership of this species is defined by the possession of a mind, a certain sort of interiority. To be properly human is having certain sorts of things going on in one's head. That's what it means to have a human soul. To be a human being is to have a mind that has thoughts which are then communicated to others, who are assumed to have similar minds, by means of language. In “On What it is Like to be a Man”, V. C. Aldrich says, “They (the people who hold this position) picture ‘the mind’ as an ‘inner’ out-of-sight, nebulous container of thoughts, images,

feelings, and the like; and they picture speaking a language as an affair of producing noises whose meanings are the speaker's inner thoughts".<sup>2</sup> So to ask whether and in what sense Jesus was truly human is to ask what was going on inside his head. Did he have our sort of interiority? The text of the New Testament is scrutinized for clues as to what was happening behind his face. Was he afraid? Was he ignorant? Did he make any mistakes? And so traditionally the texts which tell of his experience in the garden of Gethsemane are normally taken as the proof texts of his humanity. That's the moment when the facade, so to speak, cracks and we get some glimpse of his interiority. That's the moment when we discover that he is, after all, one of us. In terms of such a conception of what it is to be a human, the evangelists clearly fail to give us the clues that we need. They are uninterested in the humanity of Jesus. And it is from this conception of our humanity that Aldrich seeks to free us in favour of the person as primarily bodily. To be a human person, to be able to think and talk and communicate, is to be bodily in our sort of a way. To be human is to have a human face. But to see this, to be cured of this wrong conception of our humanity, requires a long, painful therapy, which Fergus Kerr continues in the December issue of *New Blackfriars*. He quotes Wittgenstein, "The human being is the best picture of the human soul". The best 'model' for the human soul is *der Mensch*: man alive. Another man's soul is in his face. Another person's soul isn't something the existence of which I only postulate or deduce. As Wittgenstein asks, "Do I believe in there being a soul in another man when I look into his eyes, with astonishment and delight"?<sup>3</sup> To ask whether Jesus had a truly human soul is to ask about his face, whether it was a face that could smile and frown; it is not to probe behind for some concealed interiority. One's humanity is not given in one's depths; it is what comes to the surface and finds expression in one's skin.

Of course we must not make the same mistake of projecting back upon the New Testament authors an alien conception of what it is to be a human being, but maybe the therapy can make us slightly more sensitive to some of the ways in which they explore the significance of Jesus' humanity. Perhaps we can come to see why it is that at the climax of each of the synoptic gospels the question that Jesus puts to the disciples is not: "What do men say that I am"? but "Who do men say that I am"? The mystery of Jesus is expressed by a proper name which identifies his face. The evangelists stood within the apocalyptic tradition in which those who betray their humanity and deny God's rule, like Nebuchadnezzar, become beastlike: "He was driven out from among men, and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of

heaven till his hair grew as long as eagle's feathers, and his nails were like birds' claws" (Dan. 2:33). And in Daniel 7, the enemies of God are portrayed as beasts whereas the saints of the Most High appear as one like a Son of Man. The choice is whether one will acquire the mask of a beast or the face of a man. And it is not enough just to have a face. The face is properly human when it is radiant with God's glory. Becoming properly human is the attainment of a radiant face, the transfiguration of the skin. It may not be unimportant that one possible root meaning of the Hebrew word for man, *adam*, is "skin".<sup>4</sup> And the promise of fulfilled humanity is given in a particular face, resplendent with glory, which we identify by answering the question: "Who do men say that I am"? "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another" (I Cor. 3: 18).

Perhaps we can best find our way forward by looking at a particular psalm which looks like an abstract meditation on the nature of man, man as such, and yet which was always interpreted in terms of particular men, Psalm 8. It asks *what* man is, and yet always provokes answers in terms of *who* he is.

O Lord, our Lord,  
how majestic is thy name in all the earth!  
Thou whose glory above the heavens is chanted  
by the mouth of babes and infants,  
thou hast founded a bulwark because of thy foes,  
to still the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at the heavens, the work of thy fingers,  
the moon and the stars which thou has established;  
what is man that thou art mindful of him,  
and the son of man that thou dost care for him?

Yet thou hast made him little less than God,  
and dost crown him with glory and honour.  
Thou hast given him dominion over the work of thy hands;  
thou hast put all things under his feet,

all sheep and oxen,  
and also the beasts of the field,  
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
what ever passes along the paths of the sea.

O Lord, our Lord,  
how majestic is thy name in all the earth.

(RSV translation)

So man, then, is puzzling. The psalm focuses on the contradiction between man as the one who bears God's image in having

dominion over the whole world and yet who is insignificant. It is not just that man is very small compared with the whole cosmos, but that he is mortal. The psalm points us back to the priestly account of creation, in which the moon and the stars are given the relatively minor job of ruling the day and the light whereas man, not them, is the image of God as having dominion over all living things. But the puzzle is that they are eternal, these measurers of time, whereas the image bearer is mortal. John Bowker has shown that in this psalm, as nearly always, the phrase "the son of man" occurs in contexts which stress man's mortality. "Son of man" occurs in contexts which refer to his weakness in contrast to God and the angels, because he is subject to death".<sup>5</sup> Psalm 144 may be quoting and making more explicit Psalm 8 when it says:

O Lord, what is man that thou dost regard him,  
or the son of man that thou dost think of him?  
Man is like a breath,  
his days are like a passing shadow. (v 3f)

But what characterizes man as such is not merely that he is weak and mortal but that he *knows* that he is; he lives in the knowledge and the perception of his own death. All creatures must die, but only one is haunted by the prospect of his own death. The clearest meditation on this theme is in IV Ezra, which was probably composed at about the same time as the gospels and so gives us our clearest indications of how the authors of the New Testament might have understood what it meant to be a human being:

It had been better if the dust itself had even been unborn,  
that the mind might not have come into being from it. But as  
it is, the mind grows with us, and on this account we are  
tormented because we perish and know it.  
Let the human race lament,  
but the beasts of the field be glad!  
Let all the earth-born mourn,  
but let the cattle and flocks rejoice.  
For it is far better with them than with us; for they have  
no judgment to look for, neither do they know of any torture  
or of any salvation promised them after death. (7: 63 - 66)<sup>6</sup>

It is also characteristic of man that not only is he made in the image of God, but he knows it. Rabbi Akiba said that it was out of love that God made man in his image but, "still greater was the love in that it was made known to him that he was created in the image of God".<sup>7</sup> So the enigma of man is to have this twofold knowledge, to appropriate himself as the bearer of the image and yet subject to death. And so Psalm 8 is not merely a reflection on

the nature of man; in bringing this polarity to light, its recitation *becomes, one might say, the paradigmatically human act*. To be a human being is to live in the light of this knowledge. And this knowledge can become a torment for man, weak and mortal and yet bound up with the living God. Job is probably quoting and parodying Psalm 8 when it says:

What is man, that thou dost make so much of him,  
and that thou dost set thy mind upon him,  
dost visit him every morning,  
and test him every moment. (Job 7: 17)

The torment can only be resolved by the telling of a story, as in the Book of Job. Psalm 8 may look like an abstract meditation on the nature of man, man as such, but the “son of man” in question is the *ben adam*, the son of Adam. The psalm is counterpoising two moments in the story of a particular man. The “what” of man is resolved in terms of “who” man is. The tension at the heart of the psalm is the tension between the conception of man which is found at the end of the first chapter of Genesis, in which man and woman are made in God’s image and given dominion over all the living creatures, and the story of the fall in chapters two and three, in which man is condemned to mortality and expelled from the garden. The contrast between glory and insignificance are two moments in a story which explores who we are as sons, if one might excuse the sexist language for the moment, of Adam. And it’s an abiding tension because it was believed in the time of Jesus that even fallen man still bore God’s image. Hillel, who lived shortly before Jesus, believed that we had a duty to have regular baths so as to care for and cherish God’s image, our bodies. Of course it’s a tension that we can easily dissolve by allocating one moment in the story to the Priestly account of creation and the other to the Yahwist, but in destroying the canonical unity of the text we lose the fruitful sense of puzzlement that provokes Psalm 8. Interestingly Philo, a Hellenistic Jew of Alexandria, made a similar mistake when he read these contrasting moments as referring to different men; the man created in the image and the likeness of God is the heavenly man, untouched by change and the material and he is quite distinct from the man and the woman who fall.<sup>8</sup> And so Philo, like most modern exegetes, loses this sense of man as an enigma to be explored in terms of the drama of *somebody*. Man becomes a “what” rather than a “who”. But within mainstream Judaism to understand one’s humanity was to discover oneself within the story of Adam. Psalm 8 was really all about Adam. “Each one of us has been the Adam of his own soul” (II Baruch 54: 19). Often enough it is not clear to what extent Adam is to blame for our sorry plight or whether it’s our own fault. We are

formed by the mould of his story.

“O Thou Adam, what hast thou done! For though it was thou that sinned the fall was not thine alone, but ours also who are thy descendants! For how does it profit us that the eternal age is promised to us, whereas we have done the works that bring death”.

(IV Ezra 7: 118 - 120).

This sense of identification was preserved so strongly in later rabbinic thought that each man could say, as if he were personally Adam, “For my sake the world was created”.<sup>9</sup> And for Paul too, to be human was to find oneself caught up in the repetition of the Adamic story. It is the only plausible explanation of that strange passage in Romans where Paul speaks as if he were personally alive before the law and tempted by the serpent:

I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died; the very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me.

(Rom. 7: 9 - 11)

As Käsemann says, “There is nothing in the passage which does not fit Adam, and everything fits Adam alone”.<sup>10</sup> So then, what is man? Man is Adam, bearer of the image, made for glory and dominion, and yet mortal and weak. And to say that Christ is truly human is to claim that he is a *ben Adam*, a son of man. That is at least one thread of the resonances of that complex christological title.

The belief that man could be redeemed and come to glory naturally found form as the transfiguration of that story. Which meant that Psalm 8 could be retold, remoulded, around another actor. Man could receive another proper name. It was, not that the psalm ceased to be the story of Adam and became someone else's story instead. It was rather that the transfiguration of the *ben Adam*, the son of man, must find form in the appropriation and transformation of the meaning of that psalm. It bore the traces of a deeper drama in which we can find hope. Take, for example, the Aramaic Targum on Psalm 8. It is true the text that we have is late. The most reliable version is probably to be found in Walton's London Polyglot of 1657. But F. J. Moloney has argued recently that it provides a reliable basis for establishing the re-interpretation that psalm underwent in the first half of the first century.<sup>11</sup> Here the psalm has become personalised as the final, eschatological conflict between a Son of Man (“What is the Son of Man that thou art mindful of his works and the Son of Man that thou dost care for him”?) and an individual enemy (“Thou hast founded a bulwark because of thy foes, to destroy the author of enmity and the vio-

lent one”). And this Son of Man’s dominion over the animals has become his triumph over the forces of evil at the end of time, the dreaded Leviathan which symbolized chaos and whose defeat marks the final victory (“Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands, thou hast put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, the birds of the air and the fish of the sea and the Leviathan which passes along the paths of the sea”).

The rabbis interpreted this psalm both in terms of the glorious unfallen Adam and of the man who provided the means of a return to glory, Moses.<sup>12</sup> When God created Adam the angels were jealous of him and complained to God, saying, “What is man that thou art mindful of him”, but Adam proved that he was wiser than they were by naming the animals. Rav Judah said that when the angels complained in the words of this psalm, then God put forth his little finger and burnt them. And Joshua B. Levi said the angels became upset, once again, when Moses was given the Law and they moaned to God. So God said to Moses, “Give them an answer”. Moses showed that the angels were incapable of keeping the Law, so they repented and sung the last line of the psalm, “O Lord, our Lord, how glorious is Thy name in all the earth”. For it was only on earth and by men that the Law could be kept. So the psalm which told the story of a fall is retold as the drama of redemption.

So it is not surprising to discover that one of the ways in which the New Testament explores what it means to say that Jesus is human is to claim that Psalm 8 is really all about him. The earliest instance that we have is in I Cor. 15, where Paul is describing Jesus’ reign:

For he must reign until he has put all things under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ‘For God has put all things in subjection under his feet’. But when it says, ‘All things are put in subjection under him’, it is plain that he is excepted who put all things under him’, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to everyone. (1 Cor. 15: 25-28).

One might easily make the mistake of thinking that Paul is simply cheating here. It may look as if he is simply grabbing at a line from scripture, which originally had a quite different significance, and using it to prove a point. The dominion mentioned in the psalm pointed back to Genesis and not forward to some moment of eschatological triumph. But that would be to totally misunderstand how Paul and his contemporaries thought about being a human being. Christ is the one who offers us a way to glory, the glory that once was Adam’s by being the Adam who endured the contra-



diction of man's existence, made in the image and yet doomed. And the completion of his triumph is the overthrow of "the last enemy", death, so that the contradiction at the heart of man's existence is transcended in the mystery of our redemption. And that Paul is presupposing the original Adamic reference of this psalm is confirmed by the fact that he quotes it immediately after making an explicit comparison between Christ and Adam:

For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. (15: 21f).

The significance of Christ's humanity is explored through the re-telling of the psalm.

Matthew uses the psalm in a quite novel way in his account of Jesus' entry into the Temple:

And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David' they were indignant; and they said to him, 'Do you hear what these are saying?' And Jesus said to them, 'Yes, have you never read, "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou hast brought perfect praise"'. (Mat. 21: 14 - 16)

Once again what is at issue is the naming of Jesus by his proper name, though this time the contrast is not between Adam and the true Son of Adam, the Son of man, but between David and the Son of David. The children are those who name Jesus aright. In the first place this is significant in that the superscription to this psalm identifies it as a psalm sung by David. Clearly the context is the early christian apologetic according to which David, inspired by the Spirit, sung of his own coming Son. This is how Psalm 110.1 is interpreted in Mark 12: 35 - 37, "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, till I put your enemies under thy feet". And this same verse is quoted by Paul in I Cor. 15 immediately before he cites Psalm 8. David, then, is the one who composed the psalm in the knowledge of him whom it was really about, his own descendant. But there is another strand too. For it was David himself who banned the blind and the lame from the temple (2 Sam 5: 8). These scarred images of God are excluded from the place of glory; they express in their exclusion man as the one made for glory and yet shut out. And it is the Son of David who overcomes this contradiction and brings them in and so the children break into praise in recognition of his true identity. So once again we have here, but in terms of David rather than Adam, the psalm interpreted in terms of the true Son who unknits the damage done by the father.



The most profound meditation on Psalm 8 comes, as one would expect, from the man who has the most acute sense of the humanity of Christ, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews. And it is interesting to note that, as in the rabbinic interpretations we referred to, it all hangs on the relationship of man to the angels.

For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. It has been testified somewhere –

What is man that thou art mindful of him,  
or the son of man, that thou carest for him?  
Thou didst make him for a little while lower than the angels,  
putting everything in subjection under his feet.

Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

(Hebrews 2: 5 - 9)

The first thing to notice is that this interpretation of the psalm is based on the Greek LXX rather than the Hebrew.<sup>13</sup> The Hebrew said that man was made a little lower than the *Elohim*, the normal Hebrew word for God, but the LXX understood this word to refer to, as it could, the members of the heavenly court, the angels. And the LXX is in turn ambiguous. The Greek for “a little lower than” could be understood in a temporal sense, “for a little while lower”, which is the interpretation that Hebrew opts for. So, because of ambiguities in the Hebrew and the Greek, our author has managed to move from man as defined by a permanent subjection to God, which is how Paul reads the psalm in I Cor. 15, to man as the one who is in a temporary subjection to the angels.

Why is it important that Jesus should have been subject to the angels? Unfortunately we do not have the space for anything like an adequate discussion of this extremely complex question. Angels were ambiguous figures in contemporary Jewish thought.<sup>14</sup> They were radiant, glorious beings with human forms. Man achieved his destiny in becoming angelic, in achieving a face like theirs. They were God’s servants. And yet sometimes, as here in the Letter to the Hebrews, they represent man’s unfreedom, the forces that constrain and determine him, his alienation from his proper role as lord of creation, his weakness and mortality. To be human was *de facto* to be subject to the angels. To say that Jesus was truly human was to say that he endured this subjection. So the psalm has been re-interpreted as an affirmation of Jesus’ true humanity. Schillebeeckx writes:

Thus the true humanity of Jesus is stressed in very realistic terms: for this particular author, to be human means to be subjected to higher heavenly powers. This means that Jesus is a man who in all things can experience human destiny from the inside: he takes part in it (7: 26). Because he lives in a world which is subject to good and evil spirits, and shows solidarity with all men, Jesus can be tempted (4: 15) and suffer (2: 10-14; 5: 7; 2: 16-18; 12: 2f etc).<sup>15</sup>

So to be a human being is to have a definite nature, to be weak and frail and mortal. It is to have a proper name, to be a *ben Adam*, a Son of man. It is to find oneself entrapped in the story of Adam. So to say that Jesus is truly a man is a statement with a definite, clear content which Hebrews explores at length in showing how he shared our weakness. But the psalm carries Jesus through and beyond subjection. He is the one who is enthroned in glory. And this is not to say something simply about Jesus, it is to transform what it means to be a human being. Mankind receives a new proper name, Jesus. One must say both that Jesus is truly a man, and that to be truly human is to be the brother or sister of Jesus. To be human is to be open to transcendent glory. We can say, with Pilate, "Behold the man" (Jn. 19: 5). So perhaps the New Testament has a sense of what it is to be human that is more complex than is generally recognised. It is true of us as it was of Christ that we are children of Adam, weak, frail, mortal. But this is a humanity that is, in the psalm, appropriated and transfigured. So we must say both that Jesus was truly human, that he was conformed to our lot, *and* that to be truly human, is to be conformed to him. Being human is that which is both given and to be discovered.

The rabbis were to say later that man stood between an angelic and a bestial way of life.

Six things have been stated of human beings: in respect of three they are like the Ministering Angels, and in regard to three like beasts. In respect of three they are like the Ministering Angels: they have understanding like the Ministering Angels, and walk erect like the Ministering Angels, and speak the holy tongue like the Ministering Angels. In regard to three they are like the beasts: They eat and drink like beasts, they propagate like beasts, and they ease themselves like beasts.<sup>16</sup>

Man must choose, either to obey the Law or not. His humanity is both given and indeterminate, open. In the Book of Revelation the choice that faces us is whose name we shall bear, the name of the Lamb or the name of the beast:

Then I looked, and lo, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him a hundred and forty four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. (14:1).

And there are the others:

And they have no rest, day or night, these worshippers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of the beast. (14: 11).

The choice is of our own proper name, the name of the Lamb or the name of the beast. We can choose the mask of the beast or the face of the Son of man. We can acquire a human face, a soulful face, for "the human body is the best picture of the soul". But the body must be caught in the movement of the psalm, broken and transformed:

'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Christ'. And he charged them to tell no one about him. And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again, And he said this plainly. (Mk 8: 29f).

- 1 Cornelius Ernst O P, "Thinking about Jesus", *New Blackfriars*, May 1980, p 209
- 2 Virgil C. Aldrich, "On What it is Like to be a Man", *Inquiry*, Winter 1973, vol 16, p 362.
- 3 Fergus Kerr O P, "Wittgenstein and Theological Studies", *New Blackfriars*, December 1982, p 507.
- 4 *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. by G. Johannes Botterick & Helmer Ringgren, Michigan, 1974, Vol 1, p 78.
- 5 John Bowker, "The Son of Man", *The Journal of Theological Studies*, April 1977, Vol xxviii, p 35.
- 6 The translation is from R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, Oxford, 1913.
- 7 M. 'Avot iii, 14, quoted in Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages, their concepts and beliefs*, Jerusalem, 1979, Vol 1, p 217.
- 8 *De Opif. Mundi* 134 and *Leg. Alleg.* 1. 31.
- 9 M. San. iv. 5, quoted by Urbach, *op. cit.* p 217.
- 10 Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, London, 1980, p 196.
- 11 Dr F. J. Moloney, "The Re-interpretation of Psalm VIII and the Son of Man Debate", *New Testament Studies*, October 1981, Vol 27, pp 656 - 671.
- 12 Urbach, *op. cit.* pp 155 - 157.
- 13 cf. the useful little study by Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, ch. 9.
- 14 Rob van der Hart, *The Theology of Angels and Devils*, in *Theology Today Series*, number 36, Cork, 1972.
- 15 Edward Schillebeeckx O P, *Christ, The Christian Experience in the Modern World*, London, 1980, p 255.
- 16 Urbach, *op. cit.* p 221.