

The Son of Man in the Book of Enoch

Daniel Tells Us What He Looked Like ~ Enoch Asks Who He Is

A study of how Daniel's human-looking heavenly figure becomes Enoch's identified Son-of-Man King—and how the Gospels reveal the unexpected character of that King.

By R. I. Burns · Updated August 25, 2026

One of the most familiar explanations for Jesus' use of the title “the Son of Man” points to Daniel 7:13–14:

“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”

—Daniel 7:13–14

This passage is commonly treated as the Old Testament origin of “the Son of Man” as a title for Messiah. But Daniel does not actually call the person in his vision “the Son of Man.” He says that he saw “one like a son of man.”

The distinction is important.

Daniel is describing what the person in his vision looked like. In contrast to the monstrous beasts which precede him in the vision, this figure looks human. He appears like a son of Adam, a human being.

What is extraordinary about the figure is not the expression son of man itself, but what happens to this particular human-looking person. He comes with the clouds of heaven, approaches the Ancient of Days, and receives dominion, glory and an everlasting kingdom. All peoples, nations and languages will serve him.

The ordinary meaning of son of man is demonstrated by Daniel himself in the very next chapter. When Gabriel approaches Daniel to explain another vision, he says:

“Understand, O son of man, that the vision is for the time of the end.”

—Daniel 8:17

Here Daniel himself is a son of man.

The two passages therefore provide their own interpretive control. Daniel 7 presents a mysterious heavenly figure who looks “like a son of man,” while Daniel 8 applies “son of man” to an ordinary human being.

The same usage is familiar elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures. Ezekiel is addressed as “son of man” more than ninety times. Psalm 146 provides an especially useful example:

“Put not your trust in princes,
in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.”
—Psalm 146:3

The following verse explains the thought: the son of man dies and returns to the earth. The Psalmist's son of man is simply a mortal human being.

Thus Daniel certainly supplies the origin of the figure who would later become associated with the Son of Man, but Daniel by itself does not adequately explain the emergence of “the Son of Man” as the designation of a particular heavenly Messiah.

Somewhere between Daniel and the Gospels, something has happened to the expression.

The Book of Enoch may preserve an important part of that development.

“Who He Was, and Whence He Was”

The section of 1 Enoch known as the Book of the Parables or Similitudes (1 Enoch 37–71) contains a remarkable development of Daniel's vision.

Enoch sees a heavenly person accompanying the Head of Days. But unlike Daniel, Enoch does not merely tell us what this person looks like. He asks his angelic guide who he is:

“And I asked the angel who went with me and showed me all the hidden things, concerning that Son of Man, who he was, and whence he was, and why he went with the Head of Days?”

The angel answers:

“This is the Son of Man who hath righteousness, with whom dwelleth righteousness, and who revealeth all the treasures of that which is hidden, because the Lord of Spirits hath chosen him, and whose lot hath the pre-eminence before the Lord of Spirits in uprightness for ever.”
—1 Enoch 46:2–3

This is a significant development.

Daniel tells us what he looked like.

Enoch asks who he is.

The question itself shows that “that Son of Man” has become the identification of a particular person. Enoch wants to know who that person is and where he comes from, and the angel proceeds to explain his identity.

The Book of the Parables identifies this heavenly person under several related names and descriptions. He is the Righteous One, the Elect One, God's Anointed One, and the Son of Man.

The cumulative portrait is extraordinary.

A Catalog of the Son of Man

When Enoch's descriptions are gathered together, the Son of Man emerges as a heavenly, messianic King whose characteristics go far beyond Daniel's brief vision.

Enoch's Son of Man:

- accompanies the Head of Days (**1 Enoch 46:2**);
- possesses righteousness (**1 Enoch 46:3**);
- is God's Elect or Chosen One (**1 Enoch 46:3**);
- is God's Anointed One—his Messiah (**1 Enoch 52:4**);
- is associated with an inexhaustible fountain of righteousness (**1 Enoch 48:1**);
- was named before the sun and stars were created (**1 Enoch 48:2–3**);
- was chosen and hidden before the creation of the world (**1 Enoch 48:6**);
- will be the light of the nations (**1 Enoch 48:4**);
- will be the hope of those troubled in heart (**1 Enoch 48:4**);
- will be revealed to God's elect (**1 Enoch 48:7**);
- is bound up with the salvation of the elect (**1 Enoch 48:7**);
- will receive the homage of the inhabitants of the earth (**1 Enoch 48:5**);
- will sit upon the throne of glory (**1 Enoch 69:27**);
- will exercise judgment over the earth (**1 Enoch 69:27**);
- will overthrow the kings and mighty who oppose God (**1 Enoch 46:4–6**);
- will preside over the final removal of evil (**1 Enoch 69:29**).

The figure Daniel had glimpsed has become much more clearly identified.

Before the Creation of the World

One of Enoch's most remarkable statements concerns the Son of Man's existence before his earthly manifestation:

“And at that hour that Son of Man was named in the presence of the Lord of Spirits, and his name before the Head of Days. Yea, before the sun and the signs were created, before the stars of the heaven were made, his name was named before the Lord of Spirits.”
—1 Enoch 48:2–3

Enoch continues:

“And for this reason hath he been chosen and hidden before Him, before the creation of the world and for evermore.”
—1 Enoch 48:6

Older translations bring out this latter idea in an especially interesting way. Laurence renders the passage:

“Therefore the Elect and the Concealed One existed in his presence, before the world was created, and for ever.”

Baty similarly has:

“Therefore the Elect and the Concealed One existed in His presence, Before the world was created and for ever.”

Schodde and Charles more literally represent the underlying verbal construction as “chosen and hidden.” Thus “the Concealed One” should probably not be treated as a formal Enochic title on the same footing as Elect One or Son of Man.

Nevertheless, Laurence and Baty have perceived something important about the thought of the passage. Concealment is part of the story of the Son of Man.

He is:

chosen → hidden → revealed.

His identity exists before his identity is disclosed.

This becomes explicit later when Enoch describes the rejoicing that occurs:

“because the name of that Son of Man had been revealed unto them.”
—1 Enoch 69:26

The Son of Man is not absent. He is concealed until the appointed time of his revelation.

The Righteous One, Elect One and Anointed One

The other designations applied to this person help establish beyond the expression Son of Man itself what kind of person Enoch has in view.

He is the Righteous One. This has obvious biblical parallels. Isaiah speaks of “the Righteous One, my servant” who will make many righteous and bear their iniquities (Isaiah 53:11). The New Testament repeatedly applies the Righteous One to Jesus (Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14).

He is also the Elect One. Isaiah 42:1 speaks of God's servant as “mine Elect, in whom my soul delighteth.” At the Transfiguration, Luke records the heavenly voice declaring:

“This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!”
—Luke 9:35

Finally, Enoch explicitly calls this figure God's Anointed One:

“All these things which thou hast seen shall serve the dominion of His Anointed that he may be potent and mighty on the earth.”
—1 Enoch 52:4

Anointed One is, of course, Messiah.

Thus the identification does not depend upon assuming that Son of Man must itself mean Messiah. Enoch tells us independently that this heavenly Son-of-Man figure is God's Anointed One.

The Son of Man as King

Here we arrive at an important point of continuity between Daniel, Enoch and the Gospels.

All three present the Son-of-Man figure in connection with kingship.

Daniel's human-looking figure receives dominion, glory and an everlasting kingdom.

Enoch's Son of Man is the heavenly King before whom earthly kings and mighty men are ultimately humbled. He receives authority, exercises judgment and sits upon the throne of glory.

And Jesus likewise describes the Son of Man as a King who will eventually be openly revealed:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.”
—Matthew 25:31

This is much more than a shared expression.

Enoch has:

Son of Man → glory → throne → judgment → overthrow of evil.

Jesus has:

Son of Man → glory → angels → throne → judgment → separation of righteous and wicked.

The continuity is obvious.

He is the Son-of-Man King.

But the Gospels introduce a startling contrast.

What Kind of King Is the Son of Man?

If someone knew only the glorious Son of Man portrayed in Enoch, he might expect the Son of Man to appear as an unmistakably majestic ruler.

Jesus repeatedly attaches the designation to precisely the opposite circumstances.

“The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”
—Matthew 8:20

The glorious King is homeless.

“The Son of Man came eating and drinking,” and his opponents called him “a friend of tax collectors and sinners.”
—Matthew 11:19

The Judge of sinners associates with sinners.

“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”
—Luke 19:10

The one who will eventually judge the lost first comes to save them.

And perhaps most strikingly:

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”
—Mark 10:45

The context makes this especially important. Jesus has just contrasted his kingdom with ordinary earthly government:

“Those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.”

Then comes the revolutionary statement:

“But it shall not be so among you.”

Why?

Because the Son of Man himself does not rule that way.

The King who will eventually be served by the nations first comes among his subjects as their servant.

Continuity and Contrast

Theme	Parables of Enoch	Gospels
Identity	The Son of Man	The Son of Man
Role	King	King
Ultimate destiny	Glorious throne and universal rule	Glorious throne and universal rule
Identity before revelation	Chosen and hidden	Present but frequently unrecognized
Perspective	Predominantly heavenly and glorified	Predominantly earthly before glorification
Relationship to sinners	Ultimately their judge	First seeks and saves them
Relationship to earthly kings	Kings and mighty are humbled before him	He rejects the way earthly rulers “lord it over” others
Exercise of authority	Dominion and judgment	Service
Earthly condition	Seen as exalted	Has nowhere to lay his head
Opposition	His enemies are ultimately defeated	He first permits his enemies to reject him
Suffering	Not central to the Son-of-Man portrait	“The Son of Man must suffer many things”
Death	No developed sacrificial death	Gives his life as a ransom and is killed
Final revelation	Revealed in glory	Returns in glory
Enthronement	Sits upon the throne of glory	Will sit upon his glorious throne
Judgment	Judges the wicked	Judges the nations

The relationship between Enoch's Son of Man and the Gospel Son of Man can therefore be understood in terms of both continuity and contrast.

The contrasts are almost as significant as the similarities.

Enoch tells us how great the Son of Man is.

Jesus reveals what his greatness is like.

The kings of the earth exercise authority by placing others beneath themselves.

The Son-of-Man King exercises his authority by placing himself beneath others and serving them.

Earthly kings sacrifice their subjects to preserve themselves.

The Son of Man sacrifices himself to save his subjects.

Two Interlocking Pieces

Have you ever noticed a curious feature shared by Enoch and the Gospels? In the *Book of Enoch*, every occurrence of “**the Son of Man**” as the designation of this particular heavenly, messianic figure is confined to a single section of the collection—the *Book of the Parables*. Something remarkably similar occurs in the New Testament. Jesus’ characteristic use of “**the Son of Man**” as a designation for himself is confined almost entirely to the Gospels, with Acts 7:56 providing the notable exception. Other New Testament books occasionally contain the words *son of man*, usually in quotations or allusions to the Old Testament, but they do not employ “**the Son of Man**” in the distinctive and sustained manner found in the Gospels. In both Enoch and the New Testament, then, this particular Son-of-Man usage is concentrated within a remarkably specific body of literature. It is almost as though the *Parables* and the Gospels were meant to be read together.

The two portraits consequently resemble two puzzle pieces which interlock with surprising precision, while each considered by itself seems to call for something the other supplies.

Enoch's Son of Man is overwhelmingly presented from the heavenly side. We see the glorious King, the chosen and concealed figure, the preexistent Messiah, the Judge, the one who will sit upon the throne.

But Enoch leaves a natural question:

How does this heavenly Son of Man enter human history, and what is he like when he comes among men?

The Gospels supply precisely that missing story.

Yet the Gospel story creates the opposite question.

Here is a homeless teacher associating with sinners, seeking the lost, serving others, being rejected, suffering and finally being killed.

How can this man possibly be the universal Son-of-Man King?

Then Jesus supplies what would otherwise be the Gospel's missing piece:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory ... he will sit on his glorious throne.”

The two portraits meet.

Enoch's glorious Son of Man needs an earthly story.

The Gospels' humble earthly Son of Man needs a heavenly identity.

Each supplies what the other leaves largely unseen.

The Incarnation as the Linchpin

The Incarnation provides the conceptual linchpin which joins these two portraits.

Without it, Enoch presents us with something of a mystery. How can this preexistent heavenly figure—whose name is before God before the creation of the heavenly bodies, who is hidden before the creation of the world, and who will sit upon the throne of glory—truly be the Son of Man?

The Gospels present the inverse mystery. How can this ordinary-looking, homeless, serving, suffering man be the heavenly King who comes with the clouds, commands angels, judges nations and sits upon the throne of glory?

The Christian answer is the Incarnation.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”
—John 1:14

The heavenly person truly becomes man.

The man walking through Galilee truly possesses the heavenly identity.

This also gives Enoch's concealment motif extraordinary resonance. The Son of Man had been chosen and hidden, awaiting revelation. In the Incarnation the glorious King can be present among humanity while his glory remains concealed.

People see a carpenter's son.

They see a teacher.

They see a friend of sinners.

They see a man without a place to lay his head.

Eventually they see a condemned man hanging upon a cross.

And throughout it all Jesus says:

“the Son of Man.”

The King is present, but his glory is concealed.

The Transfiguration provides a momentary unveiling. Peter's recognition of Jesus' identity requires divine revelation. Only ultimately will what is presently concealed become universally manifest.

Thus:

Enoch's Son of Man is not absent; he is concealed.

The Gospel Son of Man is not inglorious; his glory is concealed.

The Unexpected Road to the Throne

This also helps explain one of the great surprises of Jesus' teaching.

The Gospels do not deny Enoch's glorious Son-of-Man expectation. Jesus himself speaks of the Son of Man coming in glory, accompanied by angels, sitting upon his throne and exercising judgment.

What Jesus adds is the road to the throne.

The Son of Man must suffer.

The Son of Man must be rejected.

The Son of Man must be killed.

The Son of Man gives his life as a ransom.

Only afterward comes vindication and manifested glory.

This explains why the disciples themselves had difficulty understanding Jesus. A glorious, victorious Messiah was comprehensible. A Son of Man destined for heavenly dominion was comprehensible.

But:

“the Son of Man must suffer many things ... and be killed”

was something new.

Jesus was not repudiating the glorious Son of Man.

He was revealing what no vision of the enthroned Son of Man had yet made clear: how he gets to the throne.

Enoch reveals the destination.

The Gospels reveal the road.

“In a Son of Man, in Whom There Is No Salvation”

Psalm 146 now provides an almost startling counterpoint:

“Put not your trust in princes,
in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.”

Ordinary human kings cannot ultimately save. They are sons of Adam. They die and return to the earth.

Then Jesus declares:

“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

The contrast could hardly be sharper.

A son of man cannot save.

Yet:

The Son of Man came to save.

The difference lies in who this Son of Man is.

He is genuinely human, yet he is not merely another mortal prince. He is the heavenly Son-of-Man King whom God has chosen, concealed and ultimately revealed.

From Description to Identity

The historical and literary progression can now be stated quite simply.

Daniel tells us what he looked like.

“one like a son of man”

He appears human and receives an everlasting kingdom.

Then Daniel himself is called:

“O son of man.”

The expression itself remains ordinary human terminology.

Enoch asks who he is.

“that Son of Man, who he was, and whence he was”

The answer unfolds across the Parables.

He is the Righteous One.

He is the Elect One.

He is God's Anointed One.

He was named before the heavenly bodies were created.

He was chosen and concealed before the creation of the world.

He is the light of the nations.

He is the hope of the righteous.

He will be revealed.

He will sit upon the throne of glory.

He will judge the world.

Jesus tells us who he is.

“the Son of Man.”

But Jesus also gives new revelation concerning what kind of King the Son of Man is.

He has nowhere to lay his head.

He befriends sinners.

He seeks the lost.

He saves.

He serves rather than demanding service.

He suffers.

He is rejected.

He gives his life.

He is killed.

And then:

“the Son of Man comes in his glory.”

Daniel, Enoch and the Gospels

We can therefore sharpen the usual statement that Jesus' Son-of-Man terminology derives from Daniel 7.

Daniel unquestionably supplies the foundational figure. But Daniel may explain the origin of the figure without adequately explaining the origin of the title.

Within Daniel itself, son of man can still mean simply a human being.

The Book of the Parables, however, provides evidence of the transformation we need to explain. Daniel's mysterious human-looking figure has become “that Son of Man”—an identifiable heavenly Messiah about whom Enoch explicitly asks, “who he was, and whence he was.”

Then the Gospels present Jesus repeatedly and characteristically speaking of “the Son of Man,” ordinarily without explaining the designation.

This does not prove that Jesus was directly quoting the Book of Enoch. Nor does it require us to suppose that every person who heard Jesus had read the Parables. It does, however, make Enoch extremely important evidence for the history of the idea.

Daniel gives us the figure.

Enoch gives us the identified Son-of-Man King.

Jesus identifies himself with that King and reveals what kind of King he is.

The Question of Date

The historical significance of all this naturally raises the disputed question of the date of the Book of the Parables.

Unlike other portions of 1 Enoch, no manuscript fragments of chapters 37–71 have yet been identified among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Consequently, we cannot presently demonstrate from a pre-Christian manuscript that the Parables existed before the ministry of Jesus.

This deserves to be stated plainly.

At the same time, the once influential proposal that the Parables are a much later Christian composition has failed to persuade most scholars who have subsequently addressed the question. The more serious debate concerns whether the work originated shortly before the Christian era or sometime during the first century afterward.

And here the continuities and contrasts between Enoch and the Gospels become interesting evidence in their own right.

If the Parables were simply a Christian composition derived from Gospel Christology, their omissions are curious.

They give us an exalted Son of Man, but not Jesus of Nazareth.

They give us the Messiah, but not Bethlehem.

They give us a heavenly ruler, but not his Galilean ministry.

They give us the Son of Man, but not the characteristic Gospel teaching that the Son of Man must suffer.

There is no developed Son-of-Man passion narrative.

No crucifixion of the Son of Man.

No giving of his life as a ransom for many.

No resurrection of the Son of Man after his sacrificial death.

The Parables possess precisely the glorious side of the portrait while lacking much of what is most distinctively Christian about the Gospel Son of Man.

That does not prove a pre-Christian date. But it makes straightforward Christian dependence upon the Gospels considerably less obvious than the striking similarities might initially suggest.

The Son-of-Man King

The relationship between Daniel, Enoch and the Gospels therefore turns out to be considerably richer than the mere transmission of a title.

Daniel sees a man where one might have expected another beast.

Enoch discovers that this Man is God's chosen heavenly King.

The Gospels reveal that the heavenly King has come among men.

But he does not behave as earthly kings behave.

He does not lord his authority over others.

He serves.

He does not avoid sinners.

He seeks them.

He does not sacrifice his subjects to preserve his throne.

He sacrifices himself for his subjects.

He does not arrive first at a palace.

He has nowhere to lay his head.

He does not first judge the lost.

He first comes to save them.

He does not escape rejection and death.

He passes through them.

And yet Jesus never abandons the other half of the Son-of-Man expectation.

The servant is still the King.

The homeless man is still the heir of the kingdom.

The prisoner is still the Judge.

The rejected one is still the Elect One.

The crucified man is still the one who will come in glory.

The one who serves is still the one who will sit upon the throne.

Thus the Parables and the Gospels resemble two interlocking pieces of a larger picture.

Enoch reveals the glory hidden in the Son of Man.

The Gospels reveal the humility hidden within that glory.

The Incarnation joins the two.

And perhaps the entire development can finally be expressed in four sentences:

Daniel tells us what he looked like.

Enoch asks who he is.

The Gospels reveal what kind of King he is.

Jesus tells us: I am he.

The Son of Man in the Book of Enoch

R. I. Burns - The Book of Enoch

© 2026 R. I. Burns. All rights reserved. This article may be shared freely in its complete and unaltered form.

<https://www.thebookofenoch.info/son-of-man-book-of-enoch.html>