Who is the “Son of Man”?  

The title “Son of Man” was Jesus' favorite way of referring to himself. At first glance, the title seems to point to Jesus’ identification with humanity. But the historical background of the phrase suggests it to be a title denoting Jesus’ identity as Messiah and more.

**Daniel's vision**

In OT, “son of man” sometimes just means a man. But this usage is not found in the New Testament Gospels. A more likely background for Jesus' use of the title is the vision of the prophet Daniel. In chapter 7, Daniel sees four fierce beasts arise in turn out of the sea. They represent four successive world empires. Right after that...

> Daniel 7:13-14 As my vision continued that night, I saw someone like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into his presence. He was given authority, honor, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey him. His rule is eternal—it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed.

In contrast to the four beasts, Daniel saw “someone like a son of man” – a form resembling a human being. This figure appears to be a heavenly, messianic person who is given divine authority and majesty to bring the kingdom of God in power to the earth at some future time.

**The Son of Man on earth**

Jesus' own use of this title falls into three categories. First, early in his ministry, Jesus spoke of himself only in terms of the Son of Man serving humanity on earth. In Mark 2:10, Jesus as the Son of Man claimed authority to forgive sins on earth. This claim got him in trouble because people understood that such a claim belonged only to God. We see that Jesus brought the authority of heaven to earth and exercised it among men. In Mark 2:28, Jesus said, “The Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath!” Jesus claimed authority, as the Son of Man, to interpret the rules about Sabbath observance. It was unexpected in Jewish thinking that the heavenly Son of Man would appear on earth as a man among humanity.

**The suffering Son of Man**

Jesus’ second use of the title referred to the Son of Man facing suffering and death. Once the disciples became convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, sent to fulfill the prophetic hopes of Israel, Jesus began to introduce a new concept.

> Mark 8:31 Then Jesus began to tell them that the Son of Man must suffer many terrible things and be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but three days later he would rise from the dead.

The idea of a dying Son of Man was incomprehensible to his followers. If the Son of Man is a heavenly, supernatural being, how could he possibly die? Yet Jesus said, in Mark 10:45, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.” So the Son of Man is not only a heavenly being, but also appears in weakness and humility to fulfill a destiny of suffering and death.

**The Son of Man in glory**
After Jesus announced his suffering, he also began emphasizing a third use of the “Son of Man” title. The Son of Man was coming in glory in the future. This made sense to his hearers, based on Daniel’s prophecy.

Mark 14:61-62 Then the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” Jesus said, “I am. And you will see the Son of Man seated in the place of power at God’s right hand and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

Here the Messiah was defined not just as an earthly, Davidic king but as a heavenly judge and deliverer.

Conclusion
Jesus called himself “Son of Man” because this title made an exalted claim. Yet it also permitted Jesus to fill the term with expanded meaning. Jesus laid claim to a heavenly dignity as the one who would one day usher in God’s glorious kingdom in its fulness. But to accomplish this he must first submit to human life and death.

(Derived from “A Theology of the New Testament” by George Eldon Ladd.)

Discussion Questions

1. **Set Up:** Read the article together or invite someone to set up the conversation.
2. How would you describe the Son of Man from Daniel’s prophecy in your own words?
3. In what ways did Jesus expand on Daniel’s basic idea of the Son of Man?
4. Why did Jesus’ concept of the Son of Man seem incomprehensible to his followers?
5. In summary, how would you explain the “Son of Man” title to a new Christian?
6. **Takeaway:** Write a personal action step based on this conversation.