

Izvirni znanstveni članek/Article (1.01)

Bogoslovni vestnik/Theological Quarterly 79 (2019) 1,93–103

Besedilo prejeto/Received:08/2018; Sprejeto/Accepted:10/2018

UDK/UDC: 27-27-247.8

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2019/01/Tatalovic>

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Prioritizing the Synchronic Approach to the Johannine Son of Man: John 1,51 as a Case Study

Prednostna izbira sinhronega pristopa k janezovskemu Sinu človekovemu: Jn 1,51 kot študija primera

Abstract: By noting the absence of the interaction between historical and literary analysis in the exegesis of the Johannine Son of Man, this study proposes prioritizing synchronic approach. When the methodological weaknesses of the historical-critical analysis in reaching a consistent explanation of the Johannine Son of Man is highlighted, its tendency to seek a common denominator within the complex Son of Man debate is noted. Along those lines, it is suggested that the Gospel narrative should take over that role. After considering the hermeneutical implications of such a move, the example of verse 1,51 is presented as a case study.

Key words: Fourth Gospel, Son of Man, synchronic approach, narrative

Povzetek: Pričujoča razprava – zavedajoč se odsotnosti sodelovanja med zgodovinsko in literarno analizo pri eksegezi janezovskega Sina človekovega – zagovarja prednostno izbiro sinhronega pristopa. Potem ko poudari metodološke slabosti zgodovinsko-kritične analize pri doseganju dosledne razlage janezovskega Sina človekovega, izpostavi težnjo po iskanju skupnega imenovalca, ki poteka znotraj večplastnih razprav o Sinu človekovem. V tem smislu predlaga, da bi osrednjo vlogo morala prevzeti sama evangeljska pripoved. Po opravljenem prikazu hermenevitičnih posledic tovrstnega premika, je vrstica Jn 1,51 predstavljena kot študija primera.

Ključne besede: četrti evangelij, Sin človekov, sinhroni pristop, pripoved

1. Introduction

The reason for the emergence of this study is the fact that the previous research of the term »[ὁ] υἱὸς [τοῦ] ἀνθρώπου« in biblical literature has not interacted with the growing interest in its literary design. The reason for this is two-sided.

Firstly, the variability of the meaning of the term »Son of Man« has led to such an extensive debate that even the writing of its survey is also considered to be a contribution (Burkett 1999; Müller 2008; Tatalović 2014). In the domain of the Fourth Gospel, this debate had its own development. Since a connection between *καταβαίνειν/ἀναβαίνειν* motif (1,51; 3,13 etc) with some gnostic sources has been established (Bultmann 1925), »Son of Man« characteristics have been pointed out through more frequent correlations of the Gospel with first-century traditions (Odeberg 1929; Colpe 1964; Meeks 1967; 1972; Bühner 1977; Borgen 1977). In this way, series of studies devoted to the »Johannine Son of Man« were initiated (Schulz 1957; Schnackenburg 1964/65; Moloney 1978; Rhea 1990; Burkett 1991; Sasse 2000; Ellens 2010; Reynolds 2008; Ashton 2011) and it still leads to new ideas (Loader 2017). Secondly, the literary approach to biblical literature gained in importance in the meantime. After Alan R. Culpepper introduced scholars to the potentials of narrative criticism (1983), several works pointed to the anatomy of the story the Fourth Gospel tells about Jesus Christ (Stibbe 1993; Zumstein 2004; Thatcher and Moore 2008). None of them, however, pointed to the role »Son of Man« could have in this narrative, while the researches into biblical Christology was being conducted on purely historical grounds (Bousset 1970, 211–244; Cullmann 1963; Dunn 1989; Hurtado 2003, 349–426). The reason for the lack of interaction between the two domains lies in their difference regarding the point of analysis and methodology applied: while the synchronic approach remains within the literary world of the Gospel, the attempts to explain the Johannine Son of Man *logia* mostly operate with materials beyond it. Moreover, when it comes to the exegesis of the verses that in different variants read »[ὁ] υἱὸς [τοῦ] ἀνθρώπου«,¹ it becomes so closely associated with the issues of these verses' kinship with the various religious concepts that the storyline of the Gospel remains almost entirely neglected.

Thereupon, a challenging part of the following task lies in it being intersected between the ongoing researches in literary design and Christology of the Fourth Gospel. By assuming that this book operates with the compact and pragmatic narrative (20,30-31), the present study aims to propose a synchronic approach to the Son of Man *logia* by presuming their important (if not essential) role in perceiving the John's story about Jesus Christ. In this respect, the present study is divided in two parts. In the first part, the theoretical one, the grounds and hermeneutical implications of the synchronic approach to the Johannine Son of Man are discussed. Compared to the earlier dealings with the topic, the common denominator of verses that contain »Son of Man« is now being sought in the literary world of the Gospel, since it is assumed that the interpretation should begin with the John's narration about Jesus Christ. In the second part, the more practical one, the advocated priority of the synchronic approach will be demonstrated on the example of John 1,51. The choice of this verse for the case study assumes of its prototypical use of the investigated term in the Fourth Gospel.

¹ Jn 1,51; 3,13–14; 5,27; 6,27.53.62; 8,28; 9,35; 12,23.34; 13,31.

2. Quest for a common denominator

Among many recognizable readings of the Christological titles and designations in the modern scholarship, the questions about the origin and role of »Son of Man« are always followed by the most diverse responses. The main reason for this is the exclusive use of this term (apart from Jn 12,34 and Acts 7,56) without explanation, in the third person. Does Jesus speak of himself, about some (future) state of his? Such a question, which based on the existence of the term »im Munde des Herrn« initiated the quest for Jesus' self-understanding (Lietzmann 1896, 22; 30), proved to be methodologically wrong. It always led to a labyrinth of researcher's own understanding of Jesus' self-understanding (Holzmann 1865, 213), making the debate a priori unsolvable due to the abundance of scholarly milieus. Even when A. Schweitzer considered the issue solvable at one point (1913, 9), it was not the case (Higgins 1969; Hooker 1979), because every would-be solution (Casey 2008) implied objections and new ideas (Owen 2011).

2.1 In the previous research

Yet one has a feeling of reaching the solid ground by recognizing two distinctive though often mutually exclusive ways of solving the unsolvable: the term »[ὁ] υἱὸς [τοῦ] ἀνθρώπου« was mostly being interpreted either in titular or non-titular manner. On the one hand, by putting the term in the light of the apocalyptic sources, in the center of which stands a pre-existent, heavenly and anthropomorphic figure, the titular interpretation operates with a stable fact, since »Son of Man« announcements of Parousia (Mk 14,62par) reflect the imagery of Dan 7,13. However, this does not come without the difficulties which are to be discerned from the inclusion of other inter-testamentary evidence (1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, 4Q246) to the hypothesis (Reynolds 2008). In the meantime, the non-titular approach came into existence through the work of G. Vermes and other scholars who argued that a first-person singular pronoun in Jesus' time – רב (א)שנ(א) – was mistranslated into a Christological title (1967). However, although this hypothesis claimed to be decisive (Casey 2008), it failed to explain how an ordinary Aramaic »I« became the definite Christological title.

This tendency of creating a system, or rather, this impulse of finding the common denominator in »Son of Man« sources and studies came across with vital predispositions by touching upon the Fourth Gospel. As R. Schackenburg pointed out, thirteen occurrences of the term reflect the existence of a theological stream within the Johannine milieu (1964/65, 123) which implies the possibility of being perceived independently from the literary structure it belongs to. The fact that the motifs of descent/ascent, lifting, and glorification are united in »Son of Man« verses encouraged the scholars to relate this isolated visionary appearance to the Second Temple traditions and other backgrounds. As one may observe, the research already commenced using this attitude (Bultmann 1925) still comprises the core of recent enterprises (Reynolds 2008).

The question is, however, whether any solid ground could be reached at all if common denominator is not to be deduced from the literary world of the Gospel. If one takes into consideration the essential role of refiguration has in the emerging process of a narrative (Ricoeur 1995, 128–136), then the verses in focus can neither be approached as isolated sayings nor can they be separately rooted in different traditions. At the most basic level, the refiguration is evident in the manner the author puts the aim of »this book« (20,30-31) which came into being through deliberate processes of selection and composition. But nonetheless, this basic level might be also the reason for understanding the term in a traditional way, without taking the literary qualities into consideration. The fact that the narrative is heavily dependent on the event of incarnation (1,14) fits well with the genealogical reading of the term by the Greek Fathers (Ign. Eph. 20,2), to what has been pointed in the scholarship: »The Johannine Son of Man is the human Jesus, the incarnate Logos; he has come to reveal God with a unique authority and in the acceptance or refusal of this revelation the world judges itself.« (Moloney 1978, 220) However, in the same manner the aim of the book is not exhausted by lining up the events one after the other, but is being achieved through the strategy of shaping the readers' faith (20,31), so is the synchronic approach to the Johannine Son of Man not exhausted by the systematic insight even when it ensues from the literary level, but rather by something more than that. Precisely this »more« comprises the focus of the present research which takes the literary level as the reference point.

2.2 In the present research

Following this idea, one should first ask what kind of a text the Fourth Gospel is. In that regard, a difference should be made between the story and the plot (Culpepper 1983, 77–98), the latter of which involves the communication axis (Segovia 1991, 23–26). Applying the definition given by the literary critics (Abrams 1971, 127), according to which plot refers to one narrative's order and affective power (Culpepper 1995, 348), the distinction becomes clear. The story recounts the Father's giving of the Son for the sake of those who believe in him (3,16), while the plot remains episodic and thematic due to the readers who are to gain belief in Christ by reading the story (20,30-31). This means, the storyline is episodically retold and thematically developed for the sake of the readers who learn from examples of belief and unbelief in Jesus Christ (Zumstein 2004b, 33–34). What is even more, if this is a literary work of drama (Hitchkok 1927; Culpepper 1995, 348–352) which includes the level of the community (Martyn 1968), then it could have a role of maintaining identity in the audience of probably ritual framework. The fact that dramas and theatres presupposed such a setting corresponds to Gospel being produced by a Christian community which was primarily understanding itself in this context (Krajnc 2014, 436–438). From here, the two basic characteristics of the Johannine Son of Man form the key of interpretation.

Firstly, the absence of explanation of the term is obvious. Following the proposed method, this absence does not need to be compensated by some external

factor, such as Jesus' self-understanding, apocalyptic and other traditions, but gives the opportunity to the narrative itself to delineate the contents of the term. In other words, although various concepts certainly gained meaning in Jesus, it is his actions which form the content of »Son of Man« and not the other way around (Luz 1992). At the level of the story, the term functions as a synonym for the whole of Jesus' path – from incarnation (3,13), through lifting (3,14-15; 8,28), glorification (12,23; 13,31-32), ascension to heaven (6,62), to the eschatological judgement (5,27). However, the term, at the same time, is such that demands a reader-oriented perspective: it is as if the images in which the vision of the Son of Man (1,51) is promised, refers to his food and drink (6,27.53), or to the faith in him (9,35) indicate the connection of this phenomenon with the process of reading a book. It cannot be proved with certainty that the reading process was accompanied by the presence of (resurrected) Jesus Christ as the Son of Man in the auditorium, as this would step out of the framework of literary analysis, but it can nevertheless point to such an experience.

Secondly, despite various solutions regarding the episodic structure of the Gospel (Segovia 1991, 35–46) one should not neglect the striking difference between two main thematic units (1,18–12,50; 13,1–20,31) which was highlighted already by Bultmann (1941, 56) and made spread by R. Brown (1966, 138–144). It seems that John's use of »Son of Man« (1–13) contributes to the distinction between Jesus' revelation to the world, in the first part, and to his own, in the second one. Although the irregularity in this makes the last appearance of the term at the beginning of the second part (13,31-32), it is nevertheless followed by division into two basic categories: it is located exactly between the world that will execute Jesus after one disciple steps into the night (13,30), and the disciples (*τεκνία*) that stay with Jesus (13,33). Since this is the most important and last of the crossroads for the disciples, in spite of subsequent oscillations (16,32), then the »glorification of the Son of Man« corresponds to their definite acceptance of Jesus' fate (Nielsen 2010, 364). In the communication axis with the auditorium, this crossroad is also crucial, because the readers understand that the appearance of the Son of Man is closely related to the separation from the world they should also experience. This is probably the reason for his appearance in the first part of the book, during which the reader is faced with the various examples of detachment from the world (9,35). Since the term does not appear after Jesus is alone with his own, it could have an introductory role.

For these reasons, it is herein assumed that the Gospel uses the phrase »[ὁ] υἱὸς [τοῦ] ἀνθρώπου« within a certain narrative range in order to affect the readers' faith. It does not intend to deal with the question »τίς ἐστὶν οὗτος ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου« (12,34), since it assumes that its answer is already known by those who belong to Jesus, that is to say, the readers. On the contrary, it intends to relate the reader to the experience of the Son of Man's presence and thus bring him to the ultimate goal of reading (20,31). Since this assumption cannot be verified here with all the verses in which the term appears, it will be demonstrated on the case of its first appearance as a case study.

3. Son of Man in 1,51

In scholarship, the first appearance of »Son of Man« is located at the end of a literary unit, which is, due to the condensed listing of Christological expressions, called Testimonium (1,19-51). Stimulated by Jesus' supernatural ability (1,48), Nathanael confessed faith in him (1,49), after which the promise of the vision of the Son of Man (1,50-51) was given:

ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῷ Ναθαναήλ· ῥαββί, σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, σὺ βασιλεὺς εἶ τοῦ Ἰσραήλ. 50 ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· ὅτι εἶπόν σοι ὅτι εἶδόν σε ὑποκάτω τῆς συκῆς, πιστεύεις; μείζω τούτων ὄψη. 51 καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ· ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ὄψεσθε τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνεωγῶτα καὶ τοὺς ἀγγέλους τοῦ θεοῦ ἀναβαίνοντας καὶ καταβαίνοντας ἐπὶ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.

Apart from the vividness of the vision, the diversity of its interpretation was prompted by certain irregularities: the transition to plural (ὄψη – ὄψεσθε), the absence of the reaction of the interlocutor and the realization of that which has been promised (Brown 1966, 88–91; Theobald 2009, 195–198). The story continues with the wedding in Cana (2,1-12), and the promise falls into oblivion. However, the intertextuality of 1,51 with Gen 28,12 leads to the levels of metaphorical meaning, on which Jesus' revelatory role is interpreted with the image of the ladder, James, or Bethel stone (Loader 2017, 119–124). In recent scholarship, the verse is also understood in the light of apocalyptic sources (Reynolds 2008, 98; Loader 2017, 124–132), but without taking the reader-oriented perspective into serious consideration.

Perspective, however, is different if 1,51 is examined within the literary unit that ends with the Cana wedding (1,19–2,12). The reason for this is not only the coherence of this unit which sets the beginning of Jesus' mission in the seven-day series (1,19.29.35.43; 2,1), nor the function of introducing this »opening narrative«, to which the systematic implementation of the key (recurring) characters and the Christological titles indicates (Karakolis 2017, 17–19). The basis of a different perspective is the understanding of the special status of the first sign in John's story, which is already indicated by the appendix »τῆ ἡμέρᾳ τῆ τρίτῃ« (2,1). Considering the symbolic meanings of this text (Nicklas 2004, 244–246), at least four reasons are in support of his specific identities.

First, the characteristic way of formulating the theological expressions in Johannine context is well known. The Evangelist does it gradually (ger. *Stufenhermeneutik*), leading the readers from basic theological formulations to deeper ones (Martyn 1968, 129–130; Meeks 1972, 44; Culpepper 1983, 224–225; Theissen 2000, 257–272; Zumstein 2004b, 37). Thus, the Cana wedding stands as last and most authentic Johannine image in the »seven-day« flow that culminates with the revelation of glory (2,11) as a sign to the essential community experience (1,14). Secondly, this method does not only bring the readers to one authentic image, but also bridges the events of the past with the actual situation of the audience. This is not the only case in John's story. For example, the progress from

Thomas' absence (20,19-23, 24-25) to his presence in the gathering »μεθ' ἡμέρας ὀκτώ« (20,26) enables the actual paradigm of faith to be formulated (20,29). In the same way, the happening of the wedding »τῆ ἡμέρᾳ τῆ τρίτῃ« (2,1) signals the post-Easter age of the readers, but also keeps them rooted in the flow of the past events that are presented by »day after day« order. The author obviously relies on the intonated Genesis imagery (1,1) to tell about the beginning of Jesus' mission and to reflect upon the genesis of the community at the same time. Thirdly, the Cana episode uses the symbolic confrontation between water and wine to enable the readers recognize their own setting that came into being through the transformation of Jewish cult (1,17). But, since this narrative is positioned at the beginning of the story, it has to be built upon the prolepsis of the »hour« (2,4). Remembering Jesus' death (17,1), the readers also know the »hour« still needs to come in order for the transformation to make sense. Fourth, Cana is the center from where, through the circular journey of Jesus (2,1-4,54), relationships are established with various religious representatives in the surrounding (Smith 2007), whom the theme of the wedding also unites. Hence the first is also the principle (ἀρχὴν) of other signs (2,11), as it has been recently pointed to as well (Förster 2014).

But why was this text needed? It should not be confused with the prologue of the Gospel, the role of which is different. In the light of the introductory task of the opening narrative (1,19-2,12), Cana episode was probably supposed to link the readers' situation to Jesus' and thus provide them with a firm ground to reading the story. Because the readers, from there, as they were oriented in their own life context, could follow the development of Jesus' work which commences at the fifth chapter. There are more such sections: the episode of healing the man born blind (9), emphasized by Martyn (1968), should be accompanied by the first farewell discourse (13,31-14,31), crucifixion section (19), resurrection scenes (20-21), and possibly ἐγὼ εἶμι utterances. Viewed in such a context, the use of »Son of Man« in 1,51 goes beyond the usual categories of understanding. This expression is not only the correction of the Messianic »Son of God« expectations with the destiny of the Son of Man (Mk 8,31par), nor is it the expression of Jesus' revelatory role obtained by intertextuality of 1,15 and Gen 28,12, but it opens up to the presence of the Son of Man within the gathering that reads the book. Thus, the difficulties that follow the explanation of 1,51 need to be understood as part of the communication that the Gospel realizes with the audience, during which the vision of the »greater things« is promoted. However, although the methods of literary analysis cannot answer the question of how this experience was perceived in conjunction with the reading of the Gospel, it can still be pointed out to a certain degree. One of the ways which supports such a reading of verse 1,51 is the observation of striking parallels between the episodes with Nathanael (1,45-51) and Thomas (20,24-29).

Namely, in the literary approach to the Fourth Gospel an important part is the study of characters. Like other figures, Nathanael and Thomas represent paradigms of relationship with Jesus (Hunt et al. 2013, 189-201; 504-529). While Tho-

mas' role is clear in showing the readers' demand for the resurrection to be accepted based on physical evidence (including even those offered by the Gospel), Nathanael's character demands more discussion. Does this »Israelite in whom there is no deceit« (1,47) have adequate faith already at the beginning (1,49)? If the sitting under the fig tree (1,48) stands as a metaphor for the study of the Scriptures (Nicklas 2000), the answer is not necessarily positive, because faith originating from fascination with a miracle or even exegesis is not ideal. Only the beloved disciple possesses the true faith, without even knowing the Scriptures (20,9). The quality of Nathanael's reaction is revealed, however, in comparing the episode with the Thomas pericope.

Nathanael episode (1,45-51)	Thomas episode (20,24-29)
the last episode in a longer string (1,19-51)	the last episode in a longer string (20,1-29)
Nathanael is previously absent (1,43-46)	Thomas is previously absent (20,24)
Nathanael is told: »We have found« (1,45b)	Thomas is told: »We have seen« (20,25b)
Nathanael expresses doubt (1,46b)	Thomas expresses doubt (20,25d)
Nathanael is told: »Come and see« (1,46d)	Thomas is told: »Put... and see« (20,27b)
Jesus addresses Nathanael (1,47)	Jesus addresses Thomas (20,27)
Nathanael expresses faith (1,49)	Thomas expresses faith (20,28)
Jesus questions Nathanael's faith (1,50b)	Jesus questions Thomas' faith (20,29b)
Jesus promises seeing of »greater things« to Nathanael (1,50c)	Jesus promises blessedness to those »who did not see and yet believed« (20,29c)
disciples are promised the vision of the Son of Man (1,51)	readers are promised the life-giving faith in the Son of God (20,30-31)
Nathanael's reaction is missing	Thomas' reaction is missing
beginning of [all] signs (2,1-11)	reference to [all] signs (20,30-31)
disciples believe in Jesus (2,11)	readers to believe in Jesus Christ (20,31)

Table 1: *A comparison between the episodes with Nathanael (1,45-51) and Thomas (20,24-29)*

From the presented comparison, the conclusion is drawn about the structural closeness of two episodes. That is not by coincidence. If Nathanael's reaction, like that of Thomas, seeks correction, then Jesus' answer (1,50-51) is a critique of a model of faith which is typical of the readers: the critique of faith derived from the Scripture, probably from the listed and even precise testimonies in the opening narrative as well (1,19-49). But this is not the only conclusion. For the readers who recognize themselves in Nathanael, the reading process involves the presence of the Son of Man. This, on the one hand, is brought into line with the practice of the appearance of the expression in the moments of distance from the world, which in the initial setting (2,1-4,54) confirms the exclusive occurrence of the term in Nicodemus pericope (3,13-15). On the other hand, the episode is an indicator that the presence of the Son of Man plays a role in the process of reading: where the readers are promised the vision of the Son of Man (1,51), they are also promised life-giving faith in the Son of God (20,30-31). In this way, two episodes form the poles between which the repetitive process of presenting Jesus as Christ, the Son of God (20,30-31), joins the sublime reality with the Son of Man in the center (1,14).

Finally, the hypothesis leads to an important question: Why is the Gospel not intended for the seeing of the Son of Man but for the faith in the Son of God? The answer partly lies in the relationship of these terms in early Christianity, in which the messianic title »Son of God« is interpreted by the fate of the Son of Man (Mr 8,31). Nevertheless, although these two terms can be equated, which may also have been the case in inter-testamentary literature (4Q246), the book is nevertheless intended for faith in the Son of God, in which the performance of the Son of Man should contribute. Since it is about the post-Easter era, in which Jesus' appearance differs from the earthly one, this is a possibility. At the time of early Christianity there were groups that saw their salvation figures as the Sons of Man, testimony to the Similitudes of Enoch (39,6-9; 70-71), but even before – Revelation of John. Literary portrayal of the resurrected Jesus as the Son of Man fluctuated in the Churches of Asia Minor (Rev 1,9-20) and was closely related to the act of literary communication (Rev 1,11; 19,2-3) in the same area where the Gospel of John got finally shaped (Huber 2007, 74–217). Thus, the Son of Man in the Gospel of John plays an important introductory and revelatory role (Zumstein 2016, 112), standing in a certain sense as the emblem of the community itself.

4. Conclusion

With intention to make a breakthrough from previous research of Johannine Son of Man, this exegesis suggests the priority of synchronic approach. One first needs to understand the narrative and its principles, to arrive at precise frames of interpretation. As one might observe, this assumption proved to be of threefold hermeneutical importance. Firstly, although it keeps the researcher from the labyrinth of the world »behind the text«, it still leads him to the world »in front of the text«, which may also come in conjunction with different concepts and traditions. The main difference is that these connections are here determined by a narrative, and its pragmatics, and not predetermined by the methodological setting of the researcher. Secondly, the text appears as an open reality, capable of communicating with its auditorium. In such an analysis, there are certain boundaries, although it can indicate the performative activity of the text. Thirdly, the analysis shows that the text contains essential interpretive keys, which means that it must be allowed to speak during traditional approaches. This especially applies to the study of Johannine Son of Man: it is not only an expression for the embodied Logos, but a sign of the presence of the resurrected Jesus Christ in the strategically directed process of reading the book.

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