

# Our man Jesus

by [Delbert Burkett](#) in the [May 22, 2002](#) issue

The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man.  
By Walter Wink. Fortress,  
356 pp., \$26.00.

According to Walter Wink, Christian orthodoxy has portrayed Jesus as the omnipotent God in a man-suit. Though this image of a perfect, almost inhuman Christ has dominated two millennia of Christianity, it no longer speaks to many Christians. Is it possible to construct a meaningful alternative Christology that focuses on Jesus' humanity? That is the task Wink sets for himself in *The Human Being*.

Wink, who is professor of biblical interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City, writes as one deeply committed to the Jesus tradition. Yet he shares in what he sees as a growing effort to recast the original truths of Christianity in molds that have more appeal for contemporary people. Combining historical-critical analysis with Jungian psychology and a critique of domination, he seeks to replace the myth of the divine Christ with a new liberating myth of the human Jesus.

Wink finds the basis for such a Christology in the enigmatic expression "the son of man," which occurs in the Gospels almost exclusively on the lips of Jesus. Wink translates this literally as "the son of the man," but usually substitutes more generic terms such as "child of the human" or "the human being" to mitigate the male bias. A large part of his book involves an analysis of the passages where this expression occurs in the Bible and other ancient literature.

Of primary importance to Wink's analysis is the use of the expression in Ezekiel, which he sees as the basis for Jesus' own usage. In Ezekiel 1, the prophet sees a vision of God in the form of a human (adam), and this humanlike deity addresses Ezekiel as "son (or child) of the Human One" (ben adam). Thus the humanlike God speaks to Ezekiel as a parent to a child. Wink identifies this human-divine entity as the archetypal image of fully human being. The essence of divinity is thus fully realized humanity. Therefore only God is fully human, and the task set before human

beings is to become human as God is human. Yet people have only a vague idea of what it means to be human and are incapable of becoming human by themselves. This is where Jesus comes in: Jesus serves as our model of true humanity.

In Wink's reconstruction, Jesus actually was a human being: he must have made mistakes, had personality flaws, sinned and exhibited other imperfect (i.e., human) behaviors. Yet he presented a new vision of humanity. Jesus used the expression "son of man" as Ezekiel did--as an archetypal image of what it means to be human. As such, it could denote Jesus, who exemplified this new reality, but at the same time it had a collective meaning that included those who followed Jesus' way. As the model of full humanity, Jesus criticized the dehumanizing system of domination, including patriarchy, economic exploitation, hierarchical power arrangements and racial superiority. He proclaimed the dawning of the reign of God, God's domination-free order.

Jesus substituted this archetypal image for the image of the Messiah that obsessed his disciples. While the concept of the Messiah projected power onto a single public leader, Jesus wanted to help others discover messianic powers within themselves. Refusing to be set on a pedestal and worshiped, he struggled to break the disciples' projections onto him and to relocate the truly human within them.

As the son of the man, Jesus went to his death. Traditional interpretations of Jesus' death share the presupposition that God had Jesus killed in order to redeem the world. Though Wink finds some truth in such theories, he rejects the view that God killed Jesus. It was not God who wanted Jesus dead, but the powers behind the domination system. Jesus' death shows the consequences of following the God of true humanity in a world organized for exploitation and greed.

After his death, the son of the man ascended to the right hand of God. Wink sees Jesus' ascension not as an objective historical event but as an event in the history of the psyche. Jesus' ascension symbolized his entry into the archetypal realm. Jesus became the archetype of humanness, the image of the truly Human One. His disciples would now be unable to think of God apart from Jesus.

Many of the Gospel sayings concerning the son of the man depict an apocalyptic figure who descends from heaven at the end of the age bringing judgment and destruction. Wink relies mainly on the sayings that lack this apocalyptic element. He thinks that some truth can be found in the apocalyptic sayings but admits that he

has to "dig deep" to find it. They are true insofar as they reflect hope for the future manifestation of a truly humane society, but they debase Jesus' original vision insofar as they express a longing for a supernatural intervention that will bypass human responsibility for changing the world.

As a New Testament scholar, Wink knows the uncertainties involved in any reconstruction of the historical Jesus. This knowledge leads to ambivalence in his own reconstruction. On the one hand, it seems important to him to argue that the historical Jesus actually used the expression "son of the man" in the way that Wink has described. On the other hand, he realizes that other scholars will disagree, and he hesitates to build his theological house on the shifting sands of historical-Jesus research. To safeguard his theology, Wink distinguishes between truth and historicity, giving greater weight to truth. His ultimate concern is less with whether Jesus actually said something than with whether it is true, regardless of who said it. He believes that his historical reconstruction is supported by the data, but even if it were not, he considers that it provides true insights.

Wink's work will not appeal to everyone. Non-Christians may not feel the need to rely on Jesus as a model for true humanity. That's OK with Wink, for he recognizes that there are many ways to true humanity that do not use Jesus as the archetype. Most Christians are probably more conservative than Wink and will prefer a more traditional understanding of Jesus. That's OK too, for Wink believes that the Jesus one needs will differ depending on one's developmental stage. Those who will find the greatest value in his work will be people who have a strong attachment to Christianity, but who have found some of its traditional doctrines unpalatable. For such readers, Wink provides an engaging and thoughtful attempt to reinvent Christianity.