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Did Jesus see himself as the final messiah and does it really matter?

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Historical research on the person and life of Jesus of Nazareth undoubtedly has great significance for theology and the Christian faith. One of the specific issues that exegetes and historians who deal with Jesus have been discussing is his self-awareness. The question of who Jesus considered himself to be is of course not entirely resolvable. However, it is possible to derive from a critical reading of the New Testament texts certain directions of thought about what Jesus' Christology could have been. This article, analysing the results of the Jesus Quest research, attempted to answer the question of whether Jesus saw himself as the final messiah and what significance this has for theology. The first part of the article analyses the view that Jesus did not consider himself to be the final messiah, while the second part analyses the view that he considered himself to be one. The third part will show the theological significance of Jesus' Christology.

Contribution: Theological reflection on Jesus' self-awareness is an element of building bridges between the historical approach to the origins of Christianity and systematic theology. These reflections can inspire theological development in the context of the challenge of a critical-historical reading of Scripture. There is considerable scholarship on the self-awareness of the historical Jesus and the roots of belief in Jesus' messianic nature. This article, however, takes a theological, not merely historical, perspective. It seeks to consider whether and how Jesus's views about himself might be relevant to Christian theology. The fundamental contribution of these considerations lies in reframing messiahship through praxis rather than title, and in its reflection on the theological implications of Jesus' mission.

Keywords: historical Jesus; Jesus Quest; Christology of Jesus; Jesus' self-consciousness; messianism; early Christology.

Introduction

The question of who the historical Jesus was is undoubtedly very important for theology and Christian faith. However, there is also another question, more specific, which is also not without significance for Christian reflection. Who did Jesus consider himself to be? Or, to use the title of O'Neill's book: *Who did Jesus think he was?* (O'Neill 1995). And did he consider himself to be the person the faith of later generations of Christians sees him as? The question of the self-awareness of the historical Jesus is important not only for historians but also for all Christians. Does the way Jesus understood himself and his role in God's plan have significance for theology, and if so, what significance? The following analyses will attempt to answer this question. The key concept here will be the category of the messiah, where for the sake of precision we will speak of the final messiah. Did Jesus therefore consider himself a Jewish messiah, whose coming was to signify the final action of God in history?

This article is based on the research of historians who deal with the issue of the historical Jesus. Firstly, the view according to which Jesus did not consider himself the final messiah, and therefore had a low Christology, will be analysed. Secondly, attention will turn to the perspective according to which Jesus did see himself as the final messiah. Finally, the theological conclusions that can be drawn from these considerations will be presented.

The aim of this article is therefore to demonstrate the relationship between Jesus' self-awareness and the development of Christian dogma. However, it is not only to demonstrate the rootedness of the latter in the former, but also to reflect on whether Jesus' views on himself are decisive for Christian theology. Ultimately, this is a study in theology, questioning its foundations, rather than simply a work devoted to research on the historical Jesus. The proposed approach seems to be underexplored in theological scholarship.

Historical Jesus considering himself as less than the final Messiah

As will be shown later, very often historians and exegetes who deal with the historical Jesus take a position on the issue of Jesus' self-awareness. It is obvious that it is impossible to say unequivocally who any person living 2000 years ago considered himself or herself to be. In fact, it is even difficult to say exactly who any person living today considers himself or herself to be. However, the issue of self-awareness and self-understanding is not entirely outside the domain of history. After all, actions and words express who people believe themselves to be. Therefore, it is not surprising that historians trying to reconstruct the life of Jesus on the basis of New Testament texts also address the issue of the Nazarene's self-understanding (Theissen & Merz 1998:512–567). By considering which of the words attributed to Christ in the Gospels can actually be attributed to the historical Jesus, we are thereby opting for a specific image of how he understood his mission and himself.

In the critical-historical approach to Christian sources, a cautious approach to the topic of Jesus' beliefs about himself dominates. Some researchers since the beginnings of the quest of the historical Jesus have put forward and still put forward relatively sceptical theses in this field, assuming that all kinds of traces of high Christology in the Gospels are of post-Paschal origin and result from later developments in theology. A striking example from over a century ago is Wrede's famous work on the messianic secret, in which he argues that this literary phenomenon arose to explain the lack of teaching about Jesus' messianic nature (Wrede 1971). An example from the Third Quest stage is Vermes's views, vividly presented in *The Changing Faces of Jesus* (Vermes 2001). Also, we can recall Sanders outlook extended in *The historical figure of Jesus* (Sanders 1993:13).

In response to the question of who Jesus considered himself to be, researchers state that he thought of himself as one of the people with a certain mission given to him by God to fulfil. However, this mission did not necessarily have to be understood by him as some ultimate or superior mission to the missions of other messengers of God. In this sense, we can say that in the opinion of many researchers, Jesus had no Christology at all or that he had a low Christology. This refers to such approaches, according to which Jesus considered himself to be not the final messiah, but someone less (if by final messiah we understand a figure representing God in some ultimate, unique way, and not just one of many anointed ones of God). We can put here Vermes (2001), Fredriksen (1999) or Crossan (1999), who are leading figures in the Third Quest. It is a matter of debate by the way whether such approaches to the historical Jesus dominate Jesus Quest, or whether majority of the most important historical research was ultimately conducted by Christians who necessarily wanted to show some correspondence between Jesus and the Christian faith (Crossley 2012:202).

We can distinguish several basic types of such an interpretation of Jesus' self-understanding. Firstly – and this approach is the oldest, because it goes back to Reimarus himself, the father of critical studies on the historical Jesus – we can present Jesus as seeing himself as the leader of the political struggle and a pretender to earthly kingship in Israel (Reimarus 1879). Secondly, we can say that Jesus was a sage or philosopher, similar to either the authors of the wisdom books of the Old Testament or the Greek Cynics. Thirdly, we can read Jesus as a charismatic who considered himself to have a particularly lively contact with God, similar to other Jewish charismatics of that time. Fourthly, we can finally consider Jesus primarily as someone who understood himself as one of the prophets, and specifically as a prophet announcing the coming of the kingdom of God. Of course, we are talking about certain ideal types here, not a precise classification. Mixed options are possible, in which it is recognised that Jesus saw himself, for example, as both a sage and a prophet, or as both a charismatic and a political leader. It is also worth remembering that the proposals presented here constitute the main trends in contemporary research on the historical Jesus, but do not exhaust all the theories presented by researchers. It is worth noting, for example, the vision of Jesus as a magician (Smith 1993) or as the embodiment of divine wisdom (Witherington 1994). These approaches can also open up to the perspective of Christology – especially the latter.

The first, once popular interpretation of Jesus' self-understanding is to see him as identifying with political messianism. According to this perspective, Jesus was to be a political leader who aimed to overthrow the Herodian power, and ultimately the Roman power in Israel. His mission was strictly political in nature and was a pursuit of gaining power over Israel, which was to become, under his rule, a true kingdom of God. The first great advocate of such an understanding of Jesus' self-awareness was the aforementioned Herman Samuel Reimarus, whose 'scandalous' reflections on the founder of Christianity were published by Lessing after the author's death (Reimarus 1879):

> Jesus then must have been well aware that by such a plain announcement of the kingdom of Heaven, he would only awaken the Jews to the hope of a worldly Messiah; consequently, this must have been his object in so awakening them. (p. 11)

The later character of Christianity, more spiritual and theological, and less and less political, results, according to the proponents of this theory, simply from the defeat of Jesus. Since the political struggle had clearly failed, Christians began to spiritualise the message of their master. As Reimarus (1879) states:

> …the master, and how much more his disciples, found themselves mistaken and deceived by the condemnation and the death, and that the new system of a suffering spiritual Saviour, which no one had ever known or thought of before, was invented after the death of Jesus, and invented only because the first hopes had failed. (p. 28)

In the following decades of research on the historical Jesus, the theory that Jesus is a strictly political messiah, and thus sees himself as a political leader of the resistance movement was rather unpopular. Few people today recognise that Jesus'

ambitions and intentions were strictly political and limited to the temporal dimension. This does not mean that this theory has no supporters today. One of them is Reza Aslan, the author of *Zealot*, in which he presents Jesus as a zealot (Aslan 2013). It is worth remembering that being a political messiah is not precisely the same as being the final messiah. The messianism that is meant in the sense presented here goes beyond the idea of a political messiah. They can both be related, but these two trends can also be considered completely separate (Theissen & Merz 1998:520).

Although the perception of Jesus' self-understanding in an exclusively or mainly political key seems to be a bit unsuccessful, and the perception of him as striving for armed revolution is even more unlikely (because there are many well-attested accounts of Jesus being an opponent of all violence), the theory of Jesus' political self-awareness contributes something very important to reflection on the historical Jesus. The fact that it is difficult to imagine him as having exclusively political intentions does not mean that the political dimension of reality was alien to him or did not interest him at all. The reign of God, which Jesus proclaimed, was probably supposed to be some special act of God, but not only a political change. However, this does not change the fact that the advent of this kingdom was certainly also supposed to have a political dimension. If God is to reign in Israel, then the Romans can no longer reign there. The political dimension is here exceeded, but not denied. Jesus expected an eschatological change, which, however, also included politics. He saw himself as more than a politician, but that does not mean that he did not also see himself as someone who was to introduce a new political order in God's name.

The second approach to Jesus' self-understanding is to understand the Nazarene as a sage or philosopher. According to this theory, Jesus would consider himself to be one of the Jewish sages who analyse God's Law and draw conclusions from it for life. Therefore, Jesus would be a kind of continuator of the wisdom tradition of the chosen people, which was expressed in the wisdom books of the Old Testament. Thus, Jesus would not consider himself to be an absolutely exceptional figure, but simply someone who has an important message to announce. He himself would not occupy a particularly important place in this message; what would count would be what he proclaims, which is certain wisdom. The main representative of the theory that approaches Jesus' self-understanding in this way is John Dominic Crossan. In his opinion, the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus has no distinguished intermediaries – Jesus himself is not one of them either (Crossan 1995:113). By healing the sick, Jesus does not see himself as the only one who can do such things. On the contrary, he encourages his disciples to do exactly the same (Crossan 1999):

> It is noteworthy that Jesus does not tell his departing companions to heal by praying to God for help or to heal by invoking Jesus' own name. You could argue, of course, that all of that is implicit, that they operate, as it were, with borrowed power and temporary authority. My point is simply that this expected emphasis is not explicitly present. Jesus heals, and they are told to go do the same. (p. 333)

Crossan also suggests possible connections or parallels between Jesus the sage and the Cynic philosophers (Crossan 1995:129–133, 1999:334). Other authors also explore this theme extensively, stating that Jesus was simply a cynic and saw himself as a philosopher (Betz 1994; Downing 2000). Even if a number of doubts can be raised against Jesus' self-understanding as a cynic (Eddy 1996:467–469), an essential hypothesis is that Jesus saw himself primarily as a sage or philosopher. Robert Funk, the founder of the Jesus Seminar, even stated in his famous book that Jesus was a 'secular sage' (Funk 1996:302). Thus, he certainly did not see himself as an exceptional figure in any way, nor did he focus particularly on his role. As Funk (1996) states:

> This Jesus has nothing to say about himself, other than that he had no permanent address, no bed to sleep in, no respect on his home turf. (p. 41)

The belief that Jesus considered himself a sage or philosopher also raises a number of counterarguments and doubts. Many of Jesus' statements contained in the Gospels are not so much of a wisdom-based nature, but rather of a prophetic one. Yes, the former also appear, but they do not dominate the early account of Jesus. Even more doubts are raised by the portrayal of Jesus, who is moved by the Cynic ideal and who sees himself as one of the philosophers of this trend. The Gospels show Jesus' rather strongly Jewish identity, and there is no indication in them that the master was subject to Greek influences in key aspects of his mission and identity. It is also not certain whether Jesus had any contact with the Cynics at all. In any case, the theory of Jesus' self-understanding as a sage or philosopher may indicate some important aspect of how Jesus understood his person and mission, although it certainly does not show the complete understanding.

Another proposal is to perceive Jesus as someone who considered himself a charismatic. Of course, this is not about the word itself, which was not in use at that time, but about a certain type of relationship with God and the resulting position in the community. Jewish charismatics were some kind of men of God, similar to the great prophets of past centuries. They had a particularly close bond with God, on the basis of which – as it was believed – they could perform special signs and miracles. They were characterised not so much by the prophetic mission itself or some other special divine choice, but simply by an extremely close and direct bond with Yahweh. According to some researchers, led by Geza Vermes, Jesus saw himself as such a figure. Jesus did not therefore consider himself the messiah, the son of man or the Lord, even if the Gospels attribute such titles to him. He could, however, consider himself the son of God, but not in the Nicene sense or even in the sense of any uniqueness, but simply in the sense of a filial-charismatic reference to God as Father. As Vermes (1981) puts it:

> It is in this sense that Jesus could have spoken of himself as son of God. Moreover, a special filial consciousness is manifest in the frequent and emphatic mention of God as his Father, an awareness firmly reflected in the New Testament usage. (p. 210)

Jesus' self-understanding would not have been suspended in a vacuum. There were other charismatics living in Israel at

roughly the same time: Chanina ben Dosa and Choni (Vermes 2001:237–238). The category of miraculous healing also appears in other cultures and contexts, and thus the vision of Jesus as a charismatic healer has a cross-cultural dimension (Crossley 2015:82).

The theory that Jesus considered himself a charismatic seems very convincing. Certainly, many testimonies in the Gospels indicate that Jesus saw his mission and identity as stemming from a close, direct relationship with God as Father. However, this does not determine whether Jesus' self-understanding was limited to this dimension. The fact that he considered himself a charismatic does not mean that he could not simultaneously consider himself to be someone exceptional and unique, some kind of ultimate messiah.

The last proposal regarding the self-understanding of Jesus of Nazareth, which is emerging in contemporary studies of the historical Jesus, is the apocalyptic theory. According to it, Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet and that is how he interpreted his mission. He saw himself as a prophet announcing the coming of God's judgement and God's reign. He therefore saw himself as someone similar to John the Baptist. According to the Catholic researcher Meier (1994), who died a few years ago, it can be assumed that Jesus saw himself as an eschatological prophet and miracle worker similar to Elijah:

> Jesus not only presented himself as the eschatological prophet of the coming kingdom of God, not only presented himself as the Elijah-like miracle-worker who made the future kingdom already effective and palpable to his followers, but at the same time presented himself as a teacher who could tell Israelites how to observe the Law of Moses – indeed, who could even tell Israelites what they should or should not observe in the Law. (p. 1046)

There is no doubt that Jesus considered himself a prophet. This is evidenced by the very historically reliable record in the Gospel (Mk 6:4 and parallels). This thread was certainly hushed up over the years, because with the development of Christology, the threads of low Christology disappeared in the Church in favour of high Christology. Although Meier shows that it is possible to see the new Elijah in Jesus portrayed in the Gospels, the editors of the Gospel prefer to call John the Baptist the new Elijah, in order to leave more lofty titles for Jesus.

Many authors have directly understood Jesus as an apocalyptic or eschatological prophet, that is, as one who points to the imminent end of time or at least some cosmic breakthrough and the beginning of a new era. The first widely known author to present Jesus' self-understanding in this way was Albert Schweitzer, author of the remarkable book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* from 1906 (Schweitzer 1973). In later decades, Schweitzer's theory returned with the research of Sanders (1985, 1993). Contemporary authors who develop the theory according to which Jesus considered himself an apocalyptic prophet include Bart Ehrman (1999) and Allison (1998).

The theory according to which Jesus considered himself a prophet of the end of the current world order and the coming kingdom of God is one of the dominant ones in contemporary studies of the historical Jesus. It is consistent with a large amount of data from the Gospel account interpreted critically. It is worth noting, however, that such a perception of Jesus' self-understanding does not exclude his possible understanding of himself in the key of high Christology. What is more, it leads to such an understanding, because if Jesus saw himself as a prophet announcing the fulfilment of history, he saw himself as the final prophet. From here, it is not far to the perspective according to which Jesus would consider himself the final fulfiller of God's will, and thus some kind of final messiah. It is not surprising that supporters of this theory often admitted that Jesus could consider himself to be some kind of messianic figure in the sense of a certain uniqueness and finality. Schweitzer (1973) already wrote about the messianic self-awareness that came to public view in the last days of Jesus' life:

> It was He who, in the conviction that they were wholly unable to understand it, played with His messianic self-consciousness before their eyes, just as He did at the time after the sending forth of the disciples, when, as now, He thought the end at hand. (p. 395)

As can be seen, the thesis of Jesus' messianic self-awareness strongly resonates with the theory that sees the Nazarene as an apocalyptic prophet. A contemporary supporter of this theory, Bart Ehrman, also claims that Jesus considered himself to be the messiah. 'As an apocalyptic prophet, Jesus expected the arrival of the final kingdom of God and, believed he himself would be the king in that kingdom' (Ehrman 2015:118). Did he simultaneously consider himself the son of man, and thus the apocalyptic figure whose coming he foretold? According to Ehrman, no, but this position is debatable (Quarles 2019). Jesus most likely saw himself as an agent of God's eschatological action. As James Dunn asks: 'At a responsibly historical level, can we say more?' (Dunn 2003:762).

Let us move on to the perspective of Jesus' Christology, according to which Jesus considered himself to be the final messiah – which does not mean, however, that he considered himself to be God or the incarnate son of God in the Nicene and Chalcedonian sense (Ehrman 2015:118).

Historical Jesus considering himself as the final Messiah

If we consider high Christology to be merely the conviction that Jesus is God incarnate or the son of God in the sense of the Creed of the Christian faith, then we can almost certainly state that the historical Jesus did not share such convictions. The Gospel of John, which contains many statements by Jesus in the spirit of this type of Christology (e.g. Jn 10:30; 14:9), is unique in this respect. Only minority of scholars argue that Gospel of John has a great value in the quest of the historical Jesus (Anderson 2007). Quite commonly, exegetes believe that statements of this kind, such as those in the

Gospel of John, cannot be attributed to the historical Jesus. They are rather an expression of the faith and theological awareness of the Christians from the Johannine community at the end of the first century. Not so long ago, Dreyfus (1989) could write that:

> There is no serious reason to refuse to the historical Jesus the knowledge of the mystery of his being: Son of God pre-existent in glory from all eternity, true God and true man. (p. 14)

In turn, members of the Vatican-affiliated International Theological Commission claimed at a similar time that Jesus: 'was conscious of being the only son of God and in this sense of being God himself' (International Theological Commission 1985). Today, however, the vast majority of exegetes hold a different opinion. If the historical Jesus had actually taught such things about himself, repeating symbolic stories about his own meaning and using the phrase 'I am' referring to the name of God from the Book of Exodus, it would have been remembered and told from the very beginning. Meanwhile, the Synoptic Gospels do not contain any such content at all. It is therefore most credible to assume that the historical Jesus did not consider himself to be God or some kind of Son equal to the Father. Jesus Quest researchers, both those personally unaffiliated with Christianity and those sharing the Christian faith, unanimously admit this. For Ehrman (2015) it is clear that:

> Jesus did not declare himself to be God. (p. 128)

Allison (2009) writes:

> Those who subscribe to Nicea should be anxious, for the historical Jesus did not think of himself what they think of him. (p. 89)

According to Fredriksen (2002):

> Did Jesus think he was God? I do not know, but I doubt it. From what I can tell […], he seems to have operated more within the Jewish paradigm of prophecy. (p. 11)

Wright (2010) says in turn:

> At this point, again, many Christians have taken a wrong turn. They have spoken of Jesus as being 'aware', during his lifetime, of his 'divinity' – aware in a sense that made him instantly, almost casually, the possessor of such knowledge about himself as would have made events like his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane quite inexplicable. (p. 118)

Whether Jesus considered himself the messiah is a separate issue. This concept itself is ambiguous, and it is naive to imagine that in Jesus' time all Jews were expecting some specific messiah who was to fulfil a predetermined mission. Messianic expectations were diverse, and the mere fact that Jesus could think of himself as some kind of messiah does not mean that he considered himself to be an exceptional or in some way final figure in the history of salvation. Jesus could therefore consider himself, for example, a political messiah who was to lead Israel to a victorious revolt and liberation. However, this alone would not mean that he considered himself to be the final messiah. Therefore, this is about a messianic consciousness in which Jesus would assume that he is some kind of final messenger of God, that he acts in some unique and final way on behalf of God, that he represents him in a final way. Such were the beliefs of Christians about Jesus from the very beginning. Do they go back to the times of the master's earthly life and were they shared by him? This is not out of the question. Already in a classic article from the 19th century, T.H. Root, based on historical analysis, stated that Jesus saw himself as the messiah in the key of the Old Testament (Root 1893). The same is true for Edersheim's famous work titled *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Edersheim 1886). There are a number of arguments in favour of the fact that Jesus considered himself to be the final anointed one of God, through whom the final victory of the Israelite God over evil was to take place (Ehrman 2015:118). The problem remains that it is difficult to find signs of this in the Gospels, because Jesus does not directly refer to himself as the messiah (Licona 2024:44). Of course, there is also no shortage of researchers who believe that Jesus did not see himself as the messiah, such as Fredriksen, according to whom it was the crowds in Jerusalem in Jesus' last days who proclaimed him as such (Fredriksen 1999:251). It should also be added that some researchers are suspicious of arguments that bring Jesus' self-awareness closer to Christian dogma, suggesting that such an interpretation of Jesus may be a top-down assumption and not the result of actual historical research (Crossley 2012:75).

The first element that would speak in favour of Jesus' final-messianic self-understanding is the numerous statements and behaviours in which the master from Nazareth assigns himself a key role in reconciling people with God. Very often he sets himself as a certain criterion for people's accession to the kingdom of God, as if this kingdom were to be based and born around him. He calls out to all who are weary and burdened to come to him (Mt 11:28). As E.P. Sanders strongly notes, Jesus considered faith in his mission and commitment to him to be more important than fulfilling the official criteria of the Torah, for example, in the form of offering sacrifices for atonement for sin. It is not through official penance, but through adherence to Jesus that sinners are assured salvation and participation in the kingdom of God (Sanders 1993:236).

The tradition showing this particular attitude of Jesus is truly credible from historical point of view; it seems to actually go back to the historical Jesus. This would indicate that he considered himself to be some key and final figure, some final representative of God in Israel. This type of Christology of Jesus is an extension of his apocalyptic or eschatological beliefs. As the kingdom of God is coming now, it is decisive for people whether they will open themselves to the Good News of Jesus. Jesus himself becomes the point of reference, the final prophet of God, the final messiah. His finality results simply from the fact that the natural course of history is about to end, and the awaited kingdom of God is about to come.

Another Gospel motif that seems historically credible and that speaks in favour of Jesus' messianic self-consciousness is the calling of the twelve apostles. As most researchers of the historical Jesus claim, this selection is eschatological in nature.

It is about the symbolic calling together of the twelve tribes of Israel, which until then had been dispersed. The symbolic gesture of calling the twelve apostles indicates very clearly the apocalyptic or eschatological nature of Jesus' mission. But why should this gesture directly testify to Jesus' self-understanding as the final messiah? There are two reasons.

Firstly, the calling of the twelve apostles signifies the renewal, the rebuilding of Israel's power. However, this is something that, according to prophecies and apocalyptic predictions, God is to do. It is God himself who can call together the lost and scattered generations to rebuild Israel in its fullness. It is he who is to do this at the end of time. So if Jesus does this, it means that he is acting in God's name (Wright 1996:658).

Secondly, an additional fact, which strengthens this argument, is that Jesus himself did not become one of the twelve apostles. He did not make himself one of the representatives of the gathered Israel, and yet he could have done so by choosing eleven disciples. The account that he chose the twelve apostles supports Jesus' conviction that he himself is not so much a representative of the renewed Israel as a kind of representative of God in Israel. It is he who, in the name of Yahweh, calls his people together again (Allison 2010:232).

Another clue pointing to Jesus' high Christology was outlined by Wright. It concerns the symbolism of Yahweh's return to Zion, which is present in many places in the Hebrew Bible, and to which – if Wright is to be believed – Jesus consciously refers. His journey to Jerusalem, which the Gospels speak of, is a specific reference to God's return to Zion. If so, then Jesus considers himself to be some special representative of God, someone who sets out on God's behalf to Jerusalem so that God's kingdom can come. If Wright is correct, then Jesus considered himself to be God's final anointed one, who represents God in a final way (Wright 1996:651). According to Wright, it was especially during Jesus' trial that his messianic consciousness came to the fore. Prophesying about the coming son of man, Jesus saw himself as the messiah who would sit in the kingdom of God on the throne next to God himself (Wright 1996:551). Referring to the Book of Daniel, Wright sees Jesus as one who is somehow to share in the power of God himself (Wright 1996:625). The British exegete states that Jesus consciously accepted the calling to carry out the mission of salvation in the name of God himself (Wright 1996:653). All this undoubtedly means a very high Christology, and even some subversion of the Christology of deity. It is worth adding that Paul W. Meyer also pointed out at one time that the title of the Son of Man is the key to understanding the messianic self-awareness of Jesus (Meyer 1960:138). It seems, however, that despite everything, Wright's thought should not be read as if Jesus explicitly recognised himself as God. The Nazarene still appears here as seeing himself as the final messiah, and not directly as God incarnate. Craig Evans claims that Jesus' identification with the son of man is some form of recognising himself as a divine figure – and this is where the source of the later Christian faith, and specifically the Trinitarian faith, should be seen (Evans 2002).

Apart from these most important ones, there are also other arguments supporting Jesus' messianic self-awareness. Ehrman, for example, simply points out that such self-interpretation of Jesus is the best explanation of why Jesus' disciples recognised him as the messiah during his earthly life (Ehrman 2015:119). Moreover, according to Ehrman, it was Jesus' messianic self-awareness that Judas betrayed to Jewish priests. His betrayal can therefore be seen as an argument for Jesus considering himself the messiah (Ehrman 2015:122). Finally, Ehrman's final argument, also shared by Allison, is the death of Jesus itself, which would be difficult to explain without the assumption that Jesus considered himself the king of the Jews and therefore the messiah (Allison 2009:89; Ehrman 2015:123). Other arguments cited by exegetes include the messianic nature of the entry into Jerusalem (Sanders 1993:241) or his appearance in the temple (Allison 2010:237). The background for Jesus' understanding of his messianic nature can also be seen in the Qumran texts (Tabor 2004).

As one can see, there is no shortage of arguments for the fact that Jesus could have seen himself as the final messiah. It is worth noting, however, that this does not mean the Christology of the Nicene Creed, or even the Christology of the Gospel of John. It seems absurd to assume that Jesus literally considered himself to be God. The category of incarnation or 'being God' by man does not fit at all with the mentality of Judaism in Jesus' times, nor do we have any traces in the oldest sources, that is, the Synoptic Gospels, of Jesus considering himself to be God as such, as the incarnate Logos, as the possessor of divine nature. If, however, it is meant to mean the belief in being the unique, final messiah of God, through whom Yahweh establishes his kingdom and changes the face of the world, then it is very possible that Jesus had a Christology.

Theological perspective on the historical Jesus' self-understanding

Are Jesus' beliefs about himself decisive for the Christian faith and for Christian dogma? Does the high Christology of the Church have to be based directly on the views of Jesus himself? The answer is: most certainly not. The dogmas of faith are not historical conclusions, but expressions of religious convictions that are somehow based on real history, but are not simply its resultant. The truth of a dogma or the accuracy of a given theological approach does not depend on detailed historical data. Faith in the divinity of Christ and in the incarnation simply assumes as its historical basis that 2000 years ago Jesus of Nazareth lived, who left a great mark on his followers, initiating the movement today called Christianity. However, it does not depend in its essence on what exactly Jesus did and said, and even less on what he thought (if only because this cannot be ultimately verified). The fact that Jesus did not share the exact Christian doctrine of his divinity (which is obvious) does not mean that this doctrine is meaningless or untrue (Fredriksen 2002:11). Nor would there be evidence that if Jesus shared this doctrine, in turn, it is necessarily true. The Christology of the Church does not simply depend directly on the Christology of Jesus.

Jesus' beliefs about himself are not decisive for it. As Allison aptly put it, 'Christological reflection is much more than what the first-century Jesus is likely to have thought or said about himself' (Allison 2010:462).

This does not mean, however, that Jesus' beliefs, which can largely be reconstructed on the basis of the Gospel traditions, have no theological significance at all. They do not determine the essence of Christian doctrine or its truthfulness, but they are important from the point of view of how we understand and present this doctrine. They also matter when it comes to assessing the credibility and reasonableness of this doctrine. In this sense, the question of whether Jesus considered himself to be the final messiah has theological significance. In light of the research conducted by researchers of the historical Jesus, it can be stated that while the Nazarene certainly did not consider himself to be God, it is very possible that he thought of himself as the ultimate messiah. It seems unlikely that it was only after Jesus' death that any messianic attributes began to be attributed to him (O'Neill 1995:24). A Christology of Jesus understood in this way is very probable, which also has its theological repercussions. For if Jesus considered himself to be the ultimate messiah, it means that there is a certain continuity between Jesus' beliefs about himself and the beliefs of the Church about him. In this perspective, there is an organic development between the Christology of Jesus and the later Christology of the Church (Lee 2005:319). Then even the belief in the divinity of Christ can be seen as embedded in the history of Jesus himself, as based on his beliefs about himself (although not directly). Christology would therefore be a kind of development of what Jesus himself thought about himself. This is important because it shows that the doctrine of Christianity about Christ is something that somehow grows out of Jesus' intuition. Yes, the forms of expression that this doctrine found were largely Hellenistic and alien to the Jewish context of the Gospel. However, this does not change the fact that the high Christology of the Church is not something completely alien to the historical Jesus. We can say that it was very likely present in him in an embryonic form. It is not the case that the later faith of the Church has nothing in common with the beliefs of the historical Jesus himself. Yes, there is much to suggest that he saw himself as the final messiah. The conviction about his unique role was therefore not something that was born against him. We can assume that in some sense he himself shared it. Somehow it is true, that 'orthodox Christianity is based on what Jesus himself held to be true' (O'Neill 1995:6).

The problem remains that although the historical Jesus considered himself a unique, ultimate messianic figure, as some final representative of the God of Israel, he certainly did not consider himself to be God of one essence with God the Father. It must be clearly stated, however, that the doctrine of the divinity of Christ does not contradict the fact that the historical Jesus did not have a conviction about his divinity. These are two different planes – the convictions held by Jesus himself and those that Christian reflection has developed over the centuries. As already mentioned, one is not dependent on the other. Although there is continuity between them – which is important because it shows a certain specific rooting of Christian doctrine – it is not as if one had to fully correspond to the other. Moreover, the awareness that Jesus literally did not consider himself to be God or equal to God helps to interpret Christian doctrine correctly. This awareness leads us to seek a more biblical and Jewish way of understanding what the incarnation of God in the man Jesus might mean. The categories of Greek metaphysics recede into the background, and the key becomes the understanding of Christ's divinity in the perspective of the dynamics of biblical revelation. The need for such thinking about Christian Christology of divinity is indicated by N.T. Wright in his publications cited earlier in the article.

Conclusion

In the area of the Christology of Jesus, that is, in the reflection on who Jesus of Nazareth considered himself to be and how he saw his role in history, there are two most obvious trends. The first one can be called naive, the second overly sceptical.

The naive perspective is associated with the belief, often held by people identifying with the Christian faith, that Jesus considered himself to be exactly as the later dogma of faith sees him. The historical Jesus therefore saw himself as the incarnate son of God in the sense of the second person of the Holy Trinity. His self-awareness was no less than divine. For centuries, Christians were led to this direction of thinking about the Christology of Jesus by reading the fourth canonical Gospel, in which Jesus undoubtedly speaks from a specifically divine perspective. Contemporary knowledge about the creation of the texts of the Gospels, especially the Gospel of John, forces us to reject such beliefs as naive. The idea that Jesus thought of himself directly as God is completely ahistorical and finds no support in critically analysed New Testament sources. Christology developed enormously in the decades after Jesus' death, and then in the following centuries. The way Christians interpreted and interpret the identity of their Master does not mean that he thought of himself in precisely such categories.

The second popular way of thinking about the Christology of Jesus is that the Nazarene did not see himself as anyone special. Any attempt to notice that Jesus could have seen some exceptional nature of his mission is dismissed in this way and considered wishful thinking. The Gospel texts showing that Jesus saw a certain finality of his mission in the history of salvation are then hastily described as non-historical and certainly an expression of the faith of the post-Paschal Church. This way of thinking can be called excessively sceptical. It is connected with it, as with the first way, a top-down assumption, this time saying that Jesus certainly did not see himself as anyone special.

In fact, a sober application of historical-critical methods to the Gospel texts helps us to see that the truth most likely lies somewhere in between. Jesus did not literally see himself as God, but neither did he see himself as just another prophet or sage among many. Jesus seems to have

seen himself as some kind of messiah, in the sense that he saw himself as the ultimate fulfiller of God's will for Israel and the world. But does this fact have any significant theological implications?

Firstly, how Jesus understood himself is not a decisive norm for Christian theology. Reflection on the meaning of the person of Jesus, which has taken place throughout the centuries of church history, necessarily goes beyond what Jesus himself taught. If this were not so, Christian theology would be unnecessary and impossible, other than the repetition of quotations from the Gospels. Simply put, the conviction that Jesus is the incarnation of God is possible regardless of who the historical Jesus himself thought he was. It would be possible even if he did not think of himself as any exceptional figure at all.

However, as much indicates, he considered himself to be such a figure. Does the fact that Jesus considered himself the final messiah have any significant significance for the theology and faith of Christians? It does, in that it shows the continuity between the beliefs of Jesus himself and the later faith of the Church. The theology of later centuries goes beyond what the historical Jesus thought of himself, but is built on it, is embedded in it. It is therefore not something made up, but it is a reflection and deepening of what was contained in the very impulse of Jesus' life.

Secondly, the Christology of Jesus is also important because it can help us properly set our Christology. Although theological reflection necessarily goes further and further, it cannot contradict what was at the beginning. It is worth building theology in such a way that it is an extension of the intuitions contained in the Gospels. This also applies to Jesus' self-awareness. It is certainly worth investigating this issue in order to conduct theological reflection in relation to how Jesus could have thought about himself. It's also important to note that for reflection on Jesus' self-understanding, his actions and attitudes are crucial, not just the concepts he employed. This is important because reflection on this topic is sometimes dominated by disputes over whether Jesus referred to himself as messiah or son of man. However, it's not the words themselves that are most important, but the overall attitude and mission of Jesus, an examination of which allows us to reconstruct his self-awareness. It is self-awareness revealed in action, in the adventure of life – just like the self-awareness of every human being. Therefore, the final conclusion is to think about the incarnation first of all in a key close to Jesus' thinking and not in the key of the Greek metaphysical tradition (without denying the latter way of thinking). The point is therefore to see faith in Jesus as the incarnate Word of God as faith that God ultimately expressed his love in the historical event of the life and death of the prophet from Nazareth. Belief in the divinity of Jesus is therefore an extension of the eschatological faith of Jesus and the early Christians – the faith that God is now inaugurating his kingdom among us.

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