

## CONSIDERATIONS CONCERNING THE GULF BETWEEN FAITH AND HISTORY IN THE RESEARCH ON THE HISTORICAL JESUS

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### Resum

La recerca històrico-crítica afirma que Jesús era un ésser humà, mentre que el querigma del cristianisme primitiu afirma que és diví. Aquest article salva aquesta contradicció: Jesús podria haver posat en mans de Déu el fet de dir qui era ell realment. En el món antic això s'anomena *contingència d'estatus*. L'aproximació cognitiva mostra que la cristologia és una barreja d'imatges contraintuitives i intuïtives. Jesús va fer que aquest món fos, indirectament i intuïtivament, transparent a Déu. El Crist del querigma es confronta directament amb la imatge contraintuïtiva de Déu, aquell que crea del no-res.

**Paraules clau:** Jesús humà, Jesús diví, contingència d'estatus, imatge contraintuïtiva, querigma.

### Abstract

*Historical critical research says that Jesus was a human being, the Early Christian Kerygma that he is divine. This article bridges this contradiction: Jesus could leave it to God who he really was. That is status contingency in the ancient world. The cognitive approach shows that Christologie is a mixture of counter-intuitive and intuitive images. Jesus made this world indirect and intuitively transparent to God. The kerygmatic Christ confronts directly with the counter-intuitive image of God, who creates from nothing.*

**Keywords:** *Humanity of Jesus, divinity of Jesus, contingency status, contraintuitive imagery, kerygma.*

For Christians Jesus is much more than simply a human being. But what is this «surplus value»? How was it possible that the first Christian considered him to be much more? How can we understand the transition from the historical Jesus to the kerygmatic Son of God?<sup>1</sup> That is both a historical and a theological question: By asking the historical question we expect to come into touch with historical reality, by asking theological questions we hope to come into contact with God. In both cases our access is dependent on attitudes, we already have in advance. We must be confident that our sources open the way to the historical reality if we read them with help of historical methods—in spite of our post-modern scepticism concerning the recognisability of the history beyond the sources. In the same way we must be confident that a religious attitude makes possible a contact with a divine reality—in spite of the modern criticism of religion and the suspicion that God may be a product of human imagination. One crucial problem of contemporary theology is without doubt the transition from a historical (or empirical) to a theological access to reality. This transition depends in my view on a change in our attitudes and in our cognitive framework. But what is really changing, when we look at Jesus historically and when we interpret him theologically? This is our problem.

Historical methods comprise a set of questions that we answer with help of sources on the one side and a set of categories for possible answers on the other side. Within Jesus research there was a change in methods during the last 30 years. Since the 50thies research operated with the ‘criterion of difference’ in order to find authentic Jesus material. The question was: What makes the difference between Jesus and Judaism on the one hand and Early Christianity on the other hand? What is without analogies in Judaism and Early Christianity? The traditions without analogies were judged to be historical and were supplemented with help of the criterion of coherence adding all other traditions that are in harmony with these Jesus traditions without

1. This problem is generally referred to by the paired concepts «historical Jesus–kerygmatic Christ.» But that is misleading. The historical Jesus was probably confronted with messianic expectations, so that the honorific title Messiah (the Greek «Christ») belongs with the historical Jesus. The honorific title «Son of God» on the other hand is clearly associated with the post-Easter Jesus (Rom 1:3–4; Acts 13:33–34). Hence it is preferable to speak of «the historical Jesus and kerygmatic Son of God.»

analogies. The result was interpreted in terms of a unique claim of revelation.<sup>2</sup> By such a method the transition from a historical to a theological attitude was no problem. Already the historical approach focused on those traditions that seemed to transcend history. But by and by the criterion of difference was replaced by the criterion of historical plausibility.<sup>3</sup> Jesus is now interpreted in the frame of Jewish history and as a starting point of the history of Early Christianity. We are asking now: What is understandable in a Jewish context as an individual phenomenon (i.e. contextual plausibility) and what may explain the origin of Early Christianity and the plurality of sources on the historical Jesus (i.e. effective plausibility)? We are looking here as well for recurrent motifs in different strands of early Christian Jesus traditions as for isolated motifs that contradict the general tendencies in Early Christianity. Both aspects of historical plausibility, contextual plausibility within Judaism on the one side and the effective plausibility within Early Christianity on the other side, are in principle independent.<sup>4</sup> By such a methodology we prefer from the outset a historical approach to Jesus as a human being: What does not fit the history of Judaism cannot be authentic, on the contrary, only what fits history can be attributed to the historical Jesus. Jesus must be at the same time the product of Jewish history and one origin of Early Christianity (though not necessary the only one).<sup>5</sup>

When analyzing the transition from the historical Jesus to the Early Christian kerygma<sup>6</sup> we deal in the first place with an historical problem: What did

2. The criterion of difference dominated Jesus research in the so called «New Quest», which started with E. Käsemann's speech 1953: «Das Problem des historischen Jesus», *ZThK* 51 (1954) 125–153 = idem, *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen I*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1960, 187–214.
3. G. THEISSEN – D. WINTER, *Die Kriterienfrage in der Jesusforschung. Vom Differenz- zum Plausibilitätskriterium* (NTOA 34), Freiburg (Schweiz): Universitätsverlag / Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1997 = *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus. The Question of Criteria*, Louisville / London: Westminster John Knox Press 2002.
4. The «criterion of coherence» is independent of the «criterion of difference or dissimilarity». It says: What is coherent in independent sources or in different currents of tradition or in different genres and forms of the Jesus tradition may be authentic —regardless of whether or not it can be derived from Judaism or from Early Christianity. G. THEISSEN – A. MERZ, «The Delay of the Parousia as a Test Case for the Criterion of Coherence», *Louvain Studies* 32 (2007) 49–66.
5. Early Christianity was also formed by Early Christian groups, by individuals like Paul and by religious influences from the Jewish and pagan environment.
6. In this article I am reworking and developing some ideas of: G. THEISSEN, «Vom Historischen Jesus zum kerygmatischen Gottessohn. Soziologische Rollenanalyse als Beitrag zum Verständnis neutestamentlicher Christologie», *EvTh* 68 (2008) 285–304. A Spain summary is: «Del Jesús histórico al hijo de dios del kerygma. Aportación sociológica a la cristología neotestamentaria», *Sel Teol* 48 (2009) 271–282.

Jesus say on himself? And what did the first Christians say on him? Why did they say much more on Jesus than Jesus will ever have said on himself? In spite of the fact that we try to understand statements on Jesus' divinity these are historical questions. But dealing these historical problems we will again and again come across theological problems, asking not only what other people in the past have thought on Jesus and God, but asking what is valid today concerning Jesus and God. At the end of my paper I will directly reflect on this transition from a historical to a theological approach. I will sketch an attempt which is based on the cognitive study of religion. In spite of the fact that it is a very profane approach to religion it may help us in understanding the transition from history to faith.

### 1. THE HUMANITY OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS

Historical research discusses three explanations for the transition from Jesus to the Kerygma: (1) the authority claim of the historical Jesus, (2) the resurrection appearances and (3) the transference of mythic roles from the religious environment on Jesus.<sup>7</sup> New Testament exegesis interpreted these three complexes as a continuum: The origin of the faith into Jesus started with his claim of being the fulfilment of the prophets. The resurrection appearances surpassed this claim by a faith positioning him beside God. The transference of mythic roles from the Jewish and pagan environment increased his status once more explaining this role for the addressees of the Early Christian proclamation: Jesus took on the role of the eschatological Son of man, he took on the role of the pre-existent wisdom, he surpassed the role of the deities in other mystery cults like the Kyria Isis and the Sons of the Gods in pagan antiquity. In this way Jesus became equal to God. This construction is not totally wrong. But the idea of continuity between the historical Jesus and the kerygmatic Christ must be corrected. There is a tension between Jesus and the Kerygma. It is the tension between humanity and divinity. The historical Jesus placed himself on the side of human beings. He made a difference between him and God. Even if this thesis asks too much from pious people, I want to defend it. I remind that according to the Christian tradition Jesus was a true human being: a *vere homo*. But how can he be at the same time *vere*

7. G. THEISSEN – A. MERZ, *Der historische Jesus*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1996, <sup>3</sup>2003, 447–492.

*deus*? Is there an unsolvable tension between the humanity of the *vere homo* and the divinity of the *vere deus*?

To make understandable this tension I refer to the Christology of the great protestant theologian Karl Barth.<sup>8</sup> He interpreted the two natures *vere homo et vere deus* as two status, the one status being (according to Phil 2, 5-11) *debasement*, the other status *exaltation*. The sovereign God renounced on his divine status becoming a human being, but just therefore Jesus was exalted to the highest status beside God. God demonstrates his sovereignty by his debasement becoming a human being, and God demonstrated his grace by exalting the crucified Jesus and through him all human beings. Thus Karl Barth interpreted theologically the two natures of Jesus Christ in terms of two dynamic processes. And just this makes possible to accept the strong historical discontinuity between the historical Jesus and the kerygmatic Son of God within a theological framework. The result of God's debasement is a human being who knows that he is not God. And the result of God's exaltation of the crucified Christ is that all human beings have the chance of being exalted by election.

### 1.1. *The difference between Jesus and God*

The thesis of this article is: Jesus' claim of authority is the claim of a human being. Jesus did not attribute himself divine status. Some traditions show that he was convinced to be a human being as opposed to God. These traditions are preserved against the tendency in Early Christianity to divinise Jesus and therefore they are authentic. I include in the following traditions a legendary tradition, because in an indirect way this tradition may confirm Jesus' consciousness of being distinct from God.

The baptism of Jesus presupposes according to most exegetes that Jesus was convinced to be a sinner, who needs remission of sins before the final judgement of God as all other people.<sup>9</sup> The tradition has obscured this fact. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus denies explicitly that he needs the baptism (Mt 3:15). The most congenial reinterpretation gives the Gospel of John: Jesus

8. Cp. K. BARTH, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, IV, Zürich: EVZ – Verlag 1960, 171-394.

9. An alternative interpretation was developed by A. PUIG I TARRECH, «Pourquoi Jésus a-t-il reçu de baptême de Jean?» *NTS* 54 (2008) 355–374: Jesus accepts the baptism as a sign of the fulfilment of times. This is true, but I think, this fulfilment starts for all people including Jesus with the remission of sins through baptism.

is loaded with sins when he comes to baptism, but these are not his own sins but the sins of the world that he bears as Gods lamb (Joh 1:29).<sup>10</sup>

Secondly there is the story of the rich young man. He addresses Jesus as «Good teacher!», but Jesus refuses this title: „Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.» (Mk 10:17f). Jesus makes explicitly a difference between him and God. The criterion is „being good». This confirms the tradition of his baptism. Jesus has a consciousness to be distinct from God.

Thirdly we may think of some statements on the present Son of Man. There is no doubt that Jesus classifies himself as a human being when contrasting the Son of man with animals: «Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.» (Mt 8:20).

I add the legend of the temptation by Satan. This story is not historical, but the origin of this story presupposes, that Jesus shares a monotheism which refuses to adore somebody else than God. On the contrary this is said to be a satanic temptation. The legend shows that a consciousness of Jesus' humanity was preserved also by his adherents (Mk 4:1–11/Lk 4:1–14).

### 1.2. *Jesus' subordination under God*

We may say: There are indeed some few evidences that Jesus made a difference between himself and God. In spite of this he attributed himself a unique role in the history between God and men. But just the evidences of his consciousness of authority confirm that he subordinated himself as a human being to God.

This can be demonstrated by his *understanding of history*. Jesus surpasses all prophets of the past —even the last prophet John the Baptist. He does not claim to be the last Jewish prophet, as many say, he claimed to be more than all the prophets of the past. He was the fulfilment of prophecy. But just by this consciousness of his role he classifies himself as a prophet, even if he is the final prophet fulfilling all previous prophecy —being a prophet and even more than a prophet. But prophets are human beings. Also Mohamed was convinced to be the seal of the prophets.

This can furthermore be demonstrated by his *understanding of the Torah*. As the sovereign interpreter of the Law he sides Moses and the other scribes

10. To some re-interpretation of the baptism in the Gospel of Luke, of the Ebionites and the Nazorites see. G. THEISSEN / A. MERZ, *Der historische Jesus*, 193.

in the Sermon on the Mount. He concurs with human beings, but not with the one and only God even if he is more than Moses.

Finally this consciousness of being a human being as opposed to God can be demonstrated by his *understanding of God*: Jesus responds probably with his responsoric Amen at the beginning of his statements to a previous divine inspiration. But just the interpretation of this «Amen» as response to divine inspiration, underlines: Jesus receives his message from God, he is not God, but an inspired human being.<sup>11</sup>

### 1.3. *Parables and symbolic actions as references to God*

As far we can say Jesus was a distinguished scribe, a decisive prophet, a unique mediator of revelation. But is there in addition a characteristic way, how Jesus did speak of God and referred to God in his activity that may imply an immediacy to God? Such immediacy could perhaps explain why his disciples later on discovered in him a divine being.<sup>12</sup> There are indeed characteristic forms of speech and actions —created by Jesus. He spoke and acted in a symbolic or metaphorical way. He invented on the one hand impressive parables and on the other hand symbolic actions. He was gifted to make the reality on earth transparent for God. Reality became a parable of God's grace and judgement by his speeches and his symbolic actions became a sign for God's reign. But also in this regard he is not without analogy: His symbolic actions continue a long tradition of prophetic symbolic actions. His parables must be situated in the beginning of a rich tradition of Jewish parables.

There is now consensus that we must correct the maxim that in the parables individual elements do not refer to special parts of the reality. Sometimes has Jesus represented himself indirectly in his parables —not in an exclusive way, but inclusive, that is, in a role that other also could take on: It is Jesus who is hidden behind the man, who is sowing on the bad and the good soil

11. J. JEREMIAS, Art. «Amen», *TRE* 2, Berlin: de Gruyter 1978, 286–391.

12. Immediacy was the basic interpretative category to understand Jesus claim of authority in G. BORNKAMM famous book, *Jesus von Nazareth*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1956 <sup>13</sup>1983. This category was taken up by J. D. CROSSAN, «Divine Immediacy and Human Immediacy: Towards New First Principle in Historical Jesus Research», *Semeia* 44 (1988) 121–140, obviously without being aware of his predecessor G. BORNKAMM. J. D. Crossan transformed this category into the «brokerless kingdom» in: J. D. CROSSAN, *The Historical Jesus. The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish peasant*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1991. There is no doubt that this category must fit some aspects of the historical Jesus.

—with the confidence that the success will be greater than all misfortune (Mc 4:3-9). It is Jesus who is hidden in the steward who gives to all labourers in the vineyard the same amount, though some of them have worked the whole day and others only one hour (Mt 20:1-16).<sup>13</sup> It is Jesus who acts like the dishonest steward, who releases others from their debts (Lk 16:1-9). It is Jesus who is the last messenger of God whom the wicked tenants of the vineyard kill (Mk 12:1-12). He acts in the role of the messenger who invites to a banquet (Lk 14:15-24). But in all these cases his role is distinguished from other figures that represent God. That his person is not as central a figure as some might think is confirmed by other parables. Many of them have not at all a reference to a mediator or a steward. They speak metaphorically of God and men. The father embraces the prodigal son. Nobody mediates between him and his father within the parable. It is much more Jesus the parable teller who is mediating between his audience and God.

Let us also take the symbolic actions of Jesus. Jesus elected twelve disciples as representatives of the twelve tribes. It was the task of the Messiah to judge the twelve tribes, Jesus transfers this task to his disciples, but did not include himself among the twelve (Mt 19:28/Lk 22:28-30 cp. Psal 17:26). He was much more than a Messiah, because he appointed others to be Messiahs.<sup>14</sup> But he was not at all God. When Jesus in another symbolic action entered Jerusalem riding on a colt as a messianic king, the sympathizing pilgrims do not welcome the coming of the kingdom of God, but of the kingdom of their father David (Mk 11:10). According to this tradition Jesus is a unique king, but a human being like David, not at all God.<sup>15</sup>

Jesus eats together with tax collectors and sinners. He is anticipating God's banquet in heaven. This is confirmed by his last supper, when he says that he will renounce on drinking wine: «Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God» (Mc 14:25). In this way he gives himself a position beside Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who are eating and drinking in the kingdom of God (Mt 8:11). But the patriarchs are human beings; they are not at all divine.

13. It was the idea of A. Merz, that the steward in Mt 20, 1–16 is a representative of Jesus, cp. G. THEISSEN – A. MERZ, *Der historische Jesus*, 306 Anm. 42.

14. G. THEISSEN, «Gruppenmessianismus. Überlegungen zum Ursprung der Kirche im Jüngerkreis Jesu», *JBTh* 7 (1992) 101–123, reworked in: IDEM, *Jesus als historische Gestalt* (FRLANT 202), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2003, 255–281.

15. I should underline that the tradition on Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem is according to my view historical – cp. also C. S. KEENER, *The historical Jesus of the Gospels*, Grand Rapids / Cambridge: Eerdmans 2010, 259–262.



Jesus casts out demons. These exorcisms are for him symbolic actions. Jesus interprets them in the following way: «If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you» (Lk 11:20). We may ask: Is it not Jesus who is the finger of God? Does he not take his position on the side of God? But the same would be true for Moses. His activity is interpreted in the Old Testament as an indication of the «finger of God» (Ex 8:15 [19]). If Jesus acts as finger of God (Lk 11:20), God is acting through Jesus, but this underlines: he himself has no divine status.

Also his most spectacular symbolic action the cleansing of the temple demonstrates his authority. When he is asked after his authority to do so, Jesus refers to the authority of John the Baptist. His critics should say, whether the baptism of John is from heaven or from men (Mk 11:27–33). By this Jesus puts his authority in analogy to the authority of the Baptist —it is the authority of a man, who is authorized from heaven.

There is today a possible consensus, that Jesus attributed to himself the crucial role in the history between God and men. That is his «eschatological consciousness of authority». But I would add: He remained with this authority on the human side. He referred himself in a special way to God: as messenger, as agent of God and as an inspired man. Among many charismatic figures in Judaism he stands out by his metaphorical speech and symbolic actions, but he is not without analogies in this regard. Parables in word and deeds are for Jesus privileged forms, to make God accessible. Here is something visible that may be valid beyond his historical context also today and that makes possible a theological approach to God mediated by the historical Jesus. We cannot speak of God except by parables and images. Parables are poetic fiction; symbolic actions are like street theatre. The poetic form of theological statements is crucial: Poetry gives people freedom. Poetry asks for free and spontaneous acceptance. But we should also be aware, parables and metaphors are an indirect way to speak on something. They are no sign of the immediate presence of God. They presuppose a God who is not directly accessible. He is accessible indirectly through images, symbols and metaphors. We may speak of a mediated immediacy, but we should be reluctant to speak of these symbols and metaphors as evidences of God's immediacy in Jesus' speech and actions.

## 2. BRIDGES BETWEEN THE HISTORICAL JESUS AND THE EARLY CHRISTIAN KERYGMA

When the historical Jesus attributed to himself a crucial but a human role between mankind and God, we come across a dilemma: Does the Kerygma, ascribing to Jesus divine status, contradict the intention of the historical Jesus? Was it against his will, that he was elevated to a divine position after Eastern beside God? I will deny this. We can make it historically understandable, why this development was possible; and this will solve this contradiction between Jesus and the Kerygma first on a historical level. I begin with explaining two historical bridges from Jesus to the Kerygma; both have their basis already with the historical Jesus and his adherents before Eastern:

- The first is the consciousness of contingency of status that was enhanced by the Jewish monotheism: God is the only one who decides on the true status of people.<sup>16</sup> That presupposes logically a deep confidence in God.
- The second is the transformed expectations of the kingdom of God and the Messiah by the Eastern appearances; this transformation includes the encounter with a creation from nothing.

2.1. *The consciousness of status contingency with Jesus*

My first consideration is: According to ancient mentality Jesus could entrust it to God, to define and to declare who he basically was. In antiquity Status is always transferred to a person by a superior one. That is the background of the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi*, i.e. of the concept that life is like a drama and God gives to everyone his special role.<sup>17</sup> But also with Jesus we find a consciousness of status contingency: Jesus says to the sons of the Zebe-

16. G. THEISSEN, «Vom Historischen Jesus zum kerygmatischen Gottessohn», 285–304. The idea that in antiquity all people are dependent with regard to their status from superior ones I owe P. Y. BRANDT, *L'identité de Jésus et l'identité de son disciple. Le récit de la transfiguration comme clef de lecture de l'Évangile de Marc* (NTOA 50), Fribourg: Universitätsverlag / Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2002.

17. Plato speaks of the «entire tragedy and comedy of life» (*Phileb.* 50b; cf. *Leg.* 644b). Epictet develops the image of the *theatrum mundi* in his *Enchiridion*: «Remember that you are an actor in a play, the character of which is determined by the Playwright: If He wishes the play to be short, it is short; if long, it is long; if He wishes you to play the part of a beggar, remember to act even this role adroitly; and so if your role be that of a cripple, an official, or a layman. For this is your business, to play admirably the role assigned you; but the selection of that role is Another's.» (*Ench.* 17) .

dee, when they ask him for sitting at the honorary places to the right and the left of Jesus: « ... but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those whom it has been prepared» (Mc 10:40). If Jesus shared the consciousness of contingency of status with the whole antiquity, he could understand himself as a human being saying: «Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone!» – and in spite of this it does not contradict his understanding of himself, when he was elevated to a divine status. As it is God, who elevated him, all is possible. The consciousness of status contingency includes the possibility that God gives Jesus a status far above all what human beings are allowed to attribute to themselves.

In Judaism (and that is also true for Jesus and his disciples) the general consciousness of status contingency was increased by monotheism. God is the only one to decide on being and non being and on rank and status, what a human being really is and what he is not. At first glance Jesus' exaltation to God seems to be a violation of monotheism.<sup>18</sup> But a consequent monotheism may also say: No human being is allowed to claim to be a God, God alone has the power and freedom, to exalt somebody to himself. We encounter this logic in the Gospel of Marc, when Marc combines two pericopes. In the first one Jesus is citing the Sch<sup>ma</sup>, the confession of Israel: «Hear, O Israel: The Lord (Kýrios) our God, the Lord (Kýrios) is one!» (Mc 12:29). A scribe adds to this confession in his answer the refusal of all other Gods: «You are right, teacher: you have truly said that he is one, *and there is no other but he!*» (Mc 12:32).<sup>19</sup> At the time of Marc the Christians were convinced that there was another Lord beside the one God. The following conversation solves this contradiction: God himself has said to Jesus the words of Ps 110:1: «The Lord (i.e. God) said to my Lord (i.e. Jesus), sit at my right hand, till I put thy enemies under thy feet.» (Mk 12:36). God himself has given Jesus a place beside him. God alone is allowed, to violate the commandment, which he himself has given to the world, You should adore only one God.

18. There are three terms to define the special combination of monotheism and Christology in the New Testament: duotheism, binitarian und christological monotheism: (1) It is a *duotheism* (but no ditheism) of two divine figures as an unsolvable unity (B. LANG, Art. «Monotheismus», *NBL* II [1995], 834-844). (2) The *binitarian monotheism* excludes the veneration of all other Gods, but includes the veneration of Jesus (L.W. HURTADO, *Lord Jesus Christ. Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, Grand Rapids / Cambridge U.K.: Eerdmans 2003, 52). (3) The *christological monotheismus* is a modified monotheism (C. C. NEWMAN [u.a.] [eds.], *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism*, JSJ.S. 63, Leiden: Brill 1999).

19. Vgl. D. STAUDT, *Heis theós und mónos theós. Monotheistische Formeln im Urchristentum und ihre Vorgeschichte bei Griechen und Juden*, Diss. theol. Heidelberg 2008 (will be published in NTOA ca. 2011/12).

What we interpret in terms of an antique mentality —as status contingency—, is actually with Jesus an unconditioned confidence and trust in God. He left it to God to decide who he ultimately was. The presupposed maxim is valid independently from the historical distance of time up to this day. All human beings are ultimately the persons they are in the judgment of God. Historical scholarship is uncertain to say, how Jesus understood himself in the end. This uncertainty corresponds with a historical reality. But what within scholarship is uncertainty based on limited sources and hypotheses, is with Jesus himself confidence in God. He could leave it to God, who he finally was. But his disciples could not in the long run leave this question open. How could it happen that they said much more of Jesus than he himself ever has said?

## 2.2. *The transformation of the expectations of the disciples*

My second consideration tries to answer this question: Already during the lifetime of Jesus the disciples developed great expectations concerning his role: They expected the coming of the kingdom of God in connection with his activity. They attributed to him probably the role of a Messiah, who will realise this kingdom of God. The expectation of the kingdom of God was their dominant hope, the belief in a Messiah only a variant of their hopes. The kingdom of God means: The one and only God will reveal himself —in this time, on this earth, in Jerusalem or Galilee. The twelve nearest disciples had a dream of being the government in this kingdom of God. Jesus crucifixion crossed their hopes. But the Eastern appearances were a new confirmation of their expectations. Since they had encountered the resurrected Christ the disciples were convinced: Jesus' expectation of the near kingdom of God was fulfilled in spite of his crucifixion, but it was fulfilled in quite another way than they had expected: It was not God who had come, but Jesus in the place of God. The resurrected Jesus had come not in order to erect his kingdom on earth, but in heaven. He was transformed by God who overcomes death and he was snatched away from death by God. That is why the human prophet of the kingdom of God changed over to the side of God. The border between God and men was crossed. The same is true for the expectation of a Messiah. It was transcended, because the Messiah is a human being. That we must date the divine dignity of Jesus actually with Eastern is demonstrated by an old formula that Paul is citing in Rom 1:4: Jesus «was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the

Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.» Also in the Gospel of Matthew it is first the resurrected Christ who says: «All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me!» (Mt 28:18). A second figure sides with God. We encounter in this historical process more than a past history. The Eastern appearances confront us with a power that can create something from nothing. There begins a new creation. The appearances are an encounter with the creative power of God or with God himself.

### 3. THE HEIGHTENING OF JESUS' DIGNITY BY EASTERN

The heightening of Jesus' dignity surpasses what we may recognize as an historical development from the historical Jesus to the Kerygma—even if we see some bridges leading from Jesus to the Kerygma. The heightening of Jesus' dignity beyond human limitations is due to a monotheistic dynamic and reduces cognitive conflicts and aporias that are intrinsic in the monotheistic faith.<sup>20</sup>

- To begin, with this kerygmatic heightening means a reduction of cognitive dissonance in the wake of the crucifixion of Jesus in those times, but also in the wake of human sufferings at all times;
- Secondly they express a reduction of transcendence by taking up mythical roles from the Jewish tradition, but also expressing a timeless yearning for God's presence and nearness;
- Thirdly it is a reduction of concurrence within a competitive syncretism that surpasses the role of pagan redeemers in those times, but expresses also for all times the presence of the unconditioned in this world.

Let us now have a look in these three types of reduction of tensions: reduction of *dissonances*, of *transcendence* and of *concurrence*.

20. G. THEISSEN, «Monotheistische Dynamik im Neuen Testament. Der Glaube an den einen und einzigen Gott und die neutestamentliche Christologie», *Kirche und Israel* 20 (2005) 130–143.

### 3.1. *The reduction of dissonance*

Cross and resurrection form together the kerygma of Jesus. The exaltation of Jesus into the heaven balances his humiliation on earth. This is a continuation of monotheistic dynamic. Israel once coped with its defeat on earth by the exaltation of JHWH to the one and only God in heaven. It is true already in pre-exilic times some prophets demanded to worship only JHWH and no other god. But first the crises of the sixth century transformed this monolatry into a monotheism repudiating the existence of all other gods. After the destruction of Jerusalem, during the long exile Israel had to choose between two possibilities, either to accept the superiority of the victorious peoples and of their gods or to hold fast to the faith in JHWH and to balance the catastrophe on earth by a victory in heaven. Due to the prophets the second alternative was successful: The other gods were deemed to be non-existent. They had not prevailed over Israel, but the one and only God, who also governed over the victorious pagan people. The more comprehensive the defeat of JHWH and of his people was on earth, so much greater the metaphysical victory of JHWH on all other gods had to be in heaven. Israel was able to cope with its defeat and all sufferance in the wake of this defeat by committing itself to the one and only God and to accept the commandments of this God as the basis of its existence.

This monotheistic dynamic recurs in the Christological dynamic of Early Christianity. The crucifixion is the crisis that contradicted messianic expectations connected with Jesus. The Eastern appearances transformed the defeat on earth in a victory of the exalted Christ in heaven. Jesus' humiliation was balanced by his exaltation to a divine status reducing in this way the dissonance of the cross. This symbolizes a timeless experience: How we should cope with the dissonance of the almighty God and human sufferings. If God is hidden in the crucified Jesus, all humiliated persons participate in his value and worth. If God is present in sufferings, man can bear them easier. God has the power to overcome all sufferings. In spite of this there is a significant difference between the breakthrough of monotheism and the origin of the Christology. Monotheism has emptied the heaven from all other Gods, there was left only one God. Christology on the contrary introduced a new human being into the heaven. Is this inconsequent?

### 3.2. *The reduction of transcendence by taking over mediator roles from Judaism*

This leads to a further consideration: the breakthrough of monotheism provoked a desire to reduce the distance of transcendence in Judaism. The more distant the one and only God was, the much greater became the significance of mediators between God and the world. This desire transformed the image of God: Beside God two figures entered the heaven already in Judaism and occupied the religious imagination of Jews: on the one side the personified wisdom as God's partner in primordial times (Prov 8; JesSir 24; SapSal 6-9), on the other side the «Son of Man» as God's agent in the last times (Dan 7). These two figures are the beginning of a «Duotheism» already within Judaism (B. Lang).<sup>21</sup> But such mediators represent a timeless problem: the desire to reduce transcendence.

*Wisdom* represents an aspect of God that is directed to the world: He loves the creation and dwells among the creatures. She is the old «queen of heaven» beside the one and only God. In Jesus tradition Jesus is the messenger of this wisdom. Wisdom did send again and again prophets, who were refused and stoned. Jesus is the last of these messengers (Lc 11:49–51; 13:34–35).<sup>22</sup> By the eastern appearances Jesus was identified with the pre-existent wisdom of God—above all in the prologue to the gospel of John, where the eternal word of God is incarnated in Jesus (Joh 1, 1-18). Also in this regard the crucial step from Jesus as messenger of wisdom to his identification with the pre-existent wisdom was based on the Eastern experiences.

The second figure beside God is the enigmatic figure like a «*Son of Man*», to whom the universal rule is translated in Dan 7, 14, after this rule has been taken from four animals who are symbols of the four inhuman kingdoms of this world. As we recognize behind the wisdom the former «queen of heaven», so we recognize behind the «Son of Man» a younger God, who is the successor of an old God (of the «ancient of days»). In the NT the Son of Man replaces God. His appearance is in the Gospel of Mk a theophany: Sun, moon and the stars will lose their light (Jes 13,10 = Mk 13,24) and the world will return to a primordial chaos and darkness. Only the glory of the Son of Man will be the light in this world. Jesus himself has spoken of the Son of Man. The first

21. B. LANG, Art. «Monotheismus», *NBL* 2, Zürich / Düsseldorf: Benzinger 1995, 834–844.

22. It is possible that such statements of Jesus being the messenger of wisdom have an authentic core. The special fate of Jesus being charged by Jewish authorities and crucified by the Romans is not at all visible in these words. Jesus seems to be the last one in a series of prophets.

Christian identified him with the heavenly «Son of Man» from Daniel 7. The Christians no longer spoke on somebody who looked like a «Son of man», but of Jesus as *the* Son of *the* Man (with a double determination by two articles). They spoke on an individual man, who was enhanced to divine authority.

The transcendence of the monotheistic God was reduced by the translation of mythic roles on Jesus in a double way: He was God's wisdom incarnated on earth; he was the Son of Man enthroned at the right hand of God. Was monotheism in this way infiltrated by a new polytheism? We discover beside God the father wisdom as a maternal God and the Son of Man as a younger Son-God —a pre-shadow of the later Trinitarian God? Or was just this opening for a plurality within God an advantage of Early Christianity compared with a strict monotheism in those times?

### 3.3. *The reduction of concurrence by assimilation to pagan redeemer roles*

We come to a last historical consideration concerning the way from Jesus to the Kerygma: the «religionsgeschichtliche Schule» explained the origin of Christianity by theories of transference. The history of (pagan) religions was something like a cloakroom, containing prefabricated Christological roles that Jesus had to be clothed with. The main candidates for such redeemer roles have been: (1) the cult of the Kyrios in the mystery religions, (2) the concepts of dying and resurrecting Sons of God (3) and the Gnostic redeemer, who descends from and returns to heaven. The missionary success of Early Christianity was explained by the assimilation of Jesus to pagan redeemer roles. Today we must state: None of these theories has to be proved true.<sup>23</sup> Today we explain all three redeemer roles as perpetuation of Jewish traditions.

The title of Kyrios is a transfer of the name of God in the Jewish Septuagint. The title of Son of God is derived from the Jewish messianic tradition; the concept of pre-existence is derived from the Jewish wisdom myth. But the

23. In the mystery cults it is only Isis who is worshipped as *Kyria*. The dying Gods may they be Sons or a daughter of a female God do not escape death: Attis body does not decay, Osiris becomes king in the underworld, Persephone stays one third of the year in the underworld. These are compromises between life and death, but no resurrection. The gnostic myth of a redeemer originated later than Early Christianity and cannot have influenced the origins of its Christology. A change in the explanation of the Christological titles was M. HENGEL, *Der Sohn Gottes*, 1975<sup>2</sup>1977 = «Der Sohn Gottes», in: *Studien zur Christologie. Kleine Schriften IV* (WUNT 201), Tübingen: Mohr 2006, 74–145.



forming of Christological concepts was also influenced by paganism. We must assume that the Gentile adherents of Jesus formed the image of Jesus according to models and redeemers that were familiar to them. A direct transfer of strange concepts was impossible. According to their self understanding the Early Christians have been antisyncretistic, but nevertheless they could form their own convictions in a way that made them more competitive in the concurrence with other cults. They should maintain all what once had appealed to them in their pre-Christian life and should even surpass it. In a pluralistic situation religions have to surpass one another by imitation. Such an indirect influence I have labelled «Überbietungssynkretismus» a syncretism of out-doing by competition.<sup>24</sup> When the Christians worshipped the one Son of God, they surpassed the many Son deities of antiquity; when they revered the Kyrios, they exceeded the power of the deified Caesars; when they adored the saviour and redeemer of the world, they outdid other redeemer figures (also the Caesars were worshipped as «saviours»).

Also this phenomenon exemplifies a timeless religious problem: What is unconditioned makes itself felt by outdoing and negating all what is conditioned. Human beings assure oneself that they actually are in touch with the unconditioned by criticism of the conditioned. Thus we get back to the basic theological problem:

4. HOW IS IT POSSIBLE THAT THE HISTORICAL JESUS AND THE KERYGMA GIVES ACCESS TO GOD IN OUR TIME?

Up to now we have been occupied with a historical approach, but again and again we came across a theological dimension. By an historical approach we make understandable, why the first Christians attributed to Jesus a divine status and thus transcended the border between man and God, but now we transcend a mere historical approach asking how we may share such a religious interpretation of Jesus and the Kerygma. We must first ask: What is a religious statement and a religious experience of the reality? I apply in the following some categories from the cognitive study of religion to the problem how to understand the way from the historical Jesus to the kerygmatic Son of

24. G. THEISSEN, *Die Religion der ersten Christen. Eine Theorie des Urchristentums*, Gütersloh: Mohn 2000, 42008, 71–98.

God.<sup>25</sup> This cognitive approach says that cognitive transgressions are essential characteristic of religion. The worship of Jesus transcends the border between Man and God. This may exemplify an essential characteristic of all religion. And we have to ask what a border was transgressed by the historical Jesus and the kerygmatic Christ and what has been the *proprium* in this special transgression.

But first I must introduce some basic ideas of the cognitive approach. The cognitive study of religion explains why some religious concepts are universally spread. They must be able to draw attention and to be stored in the memory of the people. They imprint themselves into our mind by an optimal combination of counterintuitive characteristics and intuitive ideas. Counterintuitive is all what contradicts the rules of our everyday ontology. Already little children are able to distinguish between five ontological domains: MATTER, ARTEFACTS, PLANTS, ANIMALS and PERSONS. We always activate a priori some domain specific expectations, when we classify f. ex. something as a person. We expect that a person cannot go through solid matter, that a person has emotions and intentions and that they once will die. Religious ideas violate such domain specific categories: the resurrected Christ goes through closed doors. He is immortal. He is a divine being. According to the cognitive approach the counterintuitive character of religious representations explains that they draw attention to themselves; but being embedded in a network of intuitive ideas explains why they are preserved in the long run and stored in the collective memory of our culture. Intuitively even today many agree with the message of the New Testament of the unconditioned acceptance of human beings by God's grace. The idea of an inviolable dignity of human beings is a reverberation of this idea in the secular mentality. A mixture of such intuitive ideas (as the unconditioned value of human beings) and minimal counterintuitive aspects (as the message of a crucified Son of God) is said to be optimal for the diffusion of religious ideas —also within antiquity. In double respect I want to develop this approach by some corrections to do justice to the Early Christian faith.<sup>26</sup>

25. I. Czachesz has introduced some basic concepts of the cognitive study of religion in New Testament scholarship. Cp. I. CZACHESZ, «Kontraintuitive Ideen im urchristlichen Denken», in: G. THEISSEN – P. v. GEMÜNDE (eds.), *Erkennen und Erleben. Beiträge zur psychologischen Erforschung des frühen Christentums*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2007, 197–208. Introductions into the cognitive study of religion are: P. BOYER, *Religion Explained. The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*, London: Vintage 2001; I. Pyysiäinen, *How Religion Works. Towards a New Cognitive Science of Religion* (Cognition and Culture 1), Leiden: Brill 2001.

26. I develop some thoughts in G. THEISSEN, «Jesusüberlieferungen und Christuskerygma bei Paulus. Ein Beitrag zur kognitiven Analyse urchristlicher Theologie» in: G. THOMAS – A. SCHÜLE (eds.),

1) The first correction refers to the function of counterintuitive ideas. Such counterintuitive ideas become accepted, because they have a foundational function. They say something on the basic structure of life and world. Only deities, who are sovereign on the rules of our everyday ontology, have the power to define such rules in a new way and to give them legitimacy. When God becomes a human being and human beings become divine—then exaltation and debasement belong to the basic structure of all being and both processes are an axiom of life and not an odd irregularity. The counterintuitive Christology has the function to constitute and legitimate a new life form. Exaltation and debasement belong to the basic motifs of this life form. All hierarchies are turned upside down. What is nothing in the world has unlimited value before God. This is a very bold message. It obliges to renounce on somebody's status. What I want to stress is: Counterintuitive characteristics have not only the function of drawing attention to an idea, but a function of explaining and legitimating a comprehensive life form.

2) The second correction concerns an expansion of the domains of beings. Religion does not only transcend the ontological borders between the five domains MATTER, ARTEFACTS, PLANTS, ANIMALS and PERSONS, but is contrasting all these domains of BEING together with something that may be called «NOTHING». Originally it is conceived as an amorphous «SOMETHING» in the history of religion. Myths are explaining how the Gods created the world from nothing or from an amorphous something. Therefore the all embracing violation of borders is the transgression between «NON-BEING» und «BEING» (BEING embracing MATTER, ARTEFACTS, PLANTS, ANIMALS and PERSONS). The concept of «NON-BEING» was developed in a more subtle way by the Gnostic teacher Basilides who developed the idea of a creatio ex nihilo in the beginning of the 2th century C.E. Here we come across an experience that also we share today. Up to now religious experience is possible if we are amazed that there exists something and does not exist anything. To illustrate this by an example let's take the cognition of the order of nature: This cognition as such is no religious experience. Many scientists know quite well the order of nature, all symmetries and structures, but they are no religious people. But if they experience this order in a way that let them feel, this order could be otherwise and

*Gegenwart des lebendigen Christus*, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt 2007, 119–138, and in: «Cognitive Analysis of Faith and Christological Change. A contribution to a Psychology of Early Christian Religion», In: *Changing Minds, Religion and Cognition through the Ages* (Groningen Studies in Cultural Change), Groningen: Peeters ca. 2011, 81-101.

it could not be at all, it is a non derivable miracle, than there knowledge of the natural order is transformed into a religious experience. The basic religious idea of creation do we conceptualize only in an adequate way if we enlarge our five domains of beings by a new category that is accessible only by thought, the category of non-being. We cannot see anything that is NON-BEING, it is the result of an intellectual operation.

Such considerations will help us to interpret the transformation of the historical Jesus into the kerygmatic Son of God—in a way that mediates also today faith.

May I remind you: Jesus spoke and acted in a metaphorical way. His metaphors in speech and actions transferred images from the human domain to God and transgress the border between domains of beings. They are therefore counterintuitive. In the domain beyond all other domains they infer categories of a person. At the same time the parables and symbolic actions contain so called extravagant characteristics within one and the same domain of being without violating categorical expectations. A king forgives incredible high debts. All workers in the vineyard receive the same amount in spite of different merits and effects. The beggars and outsiders are invited to the banquet. Common people, fishermen and peasants are appointed to constitute the new government of Israel. All these astonishing features are not counterintuitive but paradox, i.e. they do not violate ontological categories, and they are only improbable within one and the same ontological domain. But such paradoxical features are a semantic marker within the imagery that the parable signifies another domain of being: the world of God. If they refer to this reality of God, they transgress in a counterintuitive way ontological borders. If such counterintuitive transgressions are the essence of religion, parables and symbolic acts are no arbitrary forms of speaking and acting but they express the essence of religion. The world becomes transparent for a totally different reality. And this is a form of religious experience we also today have access to. So far the reality is transparent for God, the reality is transparent for the miracle that there exists something and not anything. That is the God marker in all being.

By the some consideration we can now understand the transformation of Jesus into the Kerygma: by the resurrection of the death we encounter a power that can create something from nothing, this power is entering the life of human beings. This power is active with the crucified Jesus. There we encounter the transgression of the decisive border, the border between nothing and being. Otherwise we find in the whole world the miracle of being hidden in other things: as the miracle of the order of nature or the

miracle of love between human beings. But here we encounter this miracle without intermixture with any other thing. We encounter this miracle as the pure power to create something from nothing.<sup>27</sup> The historical Jesus made this world transparent for God the creator by his parables and symbolic acts and mediates so an indirect way of an encounter with God. The kerygmatic Christ confronts directly with God, who is creating all things from nothing. We encounter the mystery of being and non-being as such. The historical Jesus who acted and preached in parables and creating in this metaphorical way an access to God was transformed into the Kerygma of Jesus, who himself became by his crucifixion and resurrection a parable of God.

How is the relationship between the imagery in the activity of Jesus and the imagery of the kerygma? Both are a mixture of counterintuitive and intuitive concepts. But in the parables and symbolic actions there are *intuitive* images of the everyday world that become transparent for God as a *Totaliter Aliter*, in the kerygma there are counterintuitive images that break into the everyday world. This corresponds to two basic possibilities of religious experiences: either the everyday world becomes transparent for God by a changed attitude, or this everyday world gets cracks and we are confronted immediately with a *Totaliter Aliter*.<sup>28</sup> The historical Jesus makes visible the veil at the border of this world without tearing this veil, the kerygma tears and violates this veil. We are confronted with the power of being and non-being directly. The historical Jesus has therefore his place on the side of human beings, who are in search of traces of God in this world; the kerygmatic Christ who breaks into this world as a trace of God, has his place on the side of God. Between the Jesus and the Kerygma there is a tension, but they belong together. The old liberal protestant theology was one-sided when looking for the historical Jesus as foundation of Christian faith, the dialectical and existential theology of the Kerygma was no less one-sided when proclaiming the Kerygma as the only basis of faith. Both belong together. Both are paradigms of two basic forms of religious experience. They are corresponding to the two status of

27. Here I am adopting an idea of Karl Barth: Whereas all other events relating to Jesus have a «historical» character because they stand in the context of human decisions and actions and can be misunderstood, the resurrection is according to Karl Barth exclusively God's action without any element of human action. Its only «analogy» is creation as a sovereign act of God. Cap. K. BARTH, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, IV, 1, 329 ff.

28. I have developed these two basic forms of religious experience in G. THEISSEN, *Erleben und Verhalten der ersten Christen. Eine Psychologie des Urchristentums*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2007.

Christ: *debasement* and *exaltation*. The mystery of Jesus Christ embraces both: a human being (*vere homo*) who from a human perspective gives access to God, and a divine being (*vere deus*), who from a divine perspective confronts human being with the creator.<sup>29</sup>

29. I say many thanks to Kathleen Ess, an american student at the Theological Faculty of the University of Heidelberg, for carefully reworking my English text. I am also grateful for the discussion of my paper in our Seminar at Barcelona and for many good ideas I got from my colleagues.