

Jesus – Gestalt und Gestaltungen

Rezeptionen des Galiläers in Wissenschaft,
Kirche und Gesellschaft

herausgegeben von

Petra von Gemünden, David G. Horrell
und Max Küchler

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Petra von Gemünden, David G. Horrell
und Max Küchler

unter Mitarbeit von
Ralph Hochschild und Markus Lau



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Vorwort

Ausgesprochen groß ist das Interessenspektrum von Gerd Theißen. In seinen Lehrveranstaltungen und Publikationen hat er Studierende an diesem Teil haben lassen und auch seinen weiteren Leserinnen und Lesern einen weiten Horizont eröffnet. Im Austausch mit vielen anderen Disziplinen legt G. Theißen in kreativer, die theologische Forschung befruchtender Weise das Neue Testament aus (1) und überwindet kompetent und impulsgebend die Grenzen der neutestamentlichen Disziplin hin zur Praktischen Theologie (2) und zur Systematik (3).

(1) Durch Aufnahme strukturalistischer und literatursoziologischer Verfahren hat G. Theißen die formgeschichtliche Beschreibung der Wundergeschichten und die Frage nach deren Sitz im Leben in seiner Habilitationsschrift differenzierend vertieft (Urchristliche Wundergeschichten. Ein Beitrag zur formgeschichtlichen Erforschung der synoptischen Evangelien, 1974.⁷1998)¹. Mit soziologischen bzw. sozialgeschichtlichen Fragestellungen hat er – in konsequenter Fortführung der Frage nach dem Sitz im Leben – die sozialgeschichtliche Exegese auch reflektiert und gegen viele anfängliche Widerstände erfolgreich etabliert. Er hat methodische Grundlagen gelegt, diese Grundlagen immer wieder bedacht und sozialgeschichtliche Exegese beispielgebend durchgeführt.

Der Ertrag seiner sozialgeschichtlichen Forschungen lässt sich in drei Punkten zusammenfassen. Diese waren gewinnbringend:

(a) für die *Rekonstruktion der frühchristlichen Geschichte*, so in seinen soziologischen Studien zur Jesusbewegung (Soziologie der Jesusbewegung. Ein Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Urchristentums [1977.⁶1991], eine grundlegend überarbeitete und erweiterte Fassung wurde unter dem Titel: *Die Jesusbewegung. Sozialgeschichte einer Revolution der Werte*, 2004, veröffentlicht) und zum paulinischen Christentum. Hier ragen seine Arbeiten zur sozialen Schichtung der korinthischen Gemeinde hervor

1 Ein ausführliches Schriftenverzeichnis von Gerd Theißen findet sich unter <http://www.theologie.uni-heidelberg.de/fakultaet/personen/theissen.html>.

(WUNT 19, 1979.³1989), mit denen er bald auch über die Grenzen der neutestamentlichen Wissenschaft in Deutschland hinaus bekannt wurde.

(b) für die *Rekonstruktion der urchristlichen Literaturgeschichte*. Bahnbrechend wurde hier sein Aufsatz über den Wanderradikalismus, in dem er die große Bedeutung der „Wandercharismatiker“ in der Jesusbewegung für die Überlieferung der Worte Jesu aufgezeigt hat (Wanderradikalismus. Literatursoziologische Aspekte der Überlieferung von Worten Jesu im Urchristentum, 1973). Nach diesen Jüngerüberlieferungen und den in seinen urchristlichen Wundergeschichten herausgearbeiteten Volksüberlieferungen richtete er schließlich sein Interesse auf Gemeindeüberlieferungen (Lokalkolorit und Zeitgeschichte in den Evangelien. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition [1989.²1992]).

Später fand die gesamte urchristliche Literatur (bis zur Kanonbildung) seine Aufmerksamkeit: Eine kompakte Übersicht bietet er in dem Büchlein: Das Neue Testament (2002.⁴2010). Ein Vortrag vor der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften liegt seinem breit angelegten pragmatischen Grundriss zugrunde: Die Entstehung des Neuen Testaments als literaturgeschichtliches Problem (2007.²2011).

(c) für die *Auslegung des Neuen Testaments*. Exemplarisch genannt werden sollen seine Studien: Jünger als Gewalttäter (Mt 11,12f; Lk 16,16). Der Stürmerspruch als Selbststigmatisierung einer Minorität (1995); Die Witwe als Wohltäterin. Beobachtungen zum urchristlichen Sozialethos anhand von Mk 12,41–44 (2003), und erneut seine Studien zur korinthischen Gemeinde (WUNT 19).

Gerd Theißen hat nicht nur die Fragestellungen und Theorien der seit den frühen sechziger Jahren in den Vordergrund tretenden Soziologie in die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft eingebracht, er hat auch die Einsichten der zweiten wissenschaftlichen Disziplin, die für seine Generation wichtig wurde, in der Exegese rezipiert: der Psychologie. Auch hier beobachten wir einen methodisch pluralen Zugang. So hat sich G. Theißen (lerntheoretische, psychodynamische und kognitive psychologische Ansätze aufnehmend) der religionspsychologischen Exegese zunächst anhand von paulinischen Texten zugewandt (Psychologische Aspekte paulinischer Theologie 1983.²1993) und schließlich eine breit angelegte Psychologie des Urchristentums vorgelegt (Erleben und Verhalten der ersten Christen. Eine Psychologie des Urchristentums, 2007).

Auf die Religionswissenschaft rekurriert er zur Beschreibung und Analyse der urchristlichen Religion mit dem Ziel, das Neue Testament und das Urchristentum *allen* – auch nicht kirchlich beheimateten Menschen – zugänglich zu machen. Damit möchte er die Theologie für den Dialog mit Außenstehenden öffnen und binnenkirchlich zu einer Selbstvergewisserung

einladen (Die Religion der ersten Christen. Eine Theorie des Urchristentums, 2000.³2003. E-Book ⁴2008).

Mit der jüngeren Geschichte der Exegese und der der Phil.-hist. Klasse der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, als deren Sekretar er einige Jahre wirkte, setzt er sich anhand von zwei Fachkollegen und Mitgliedern der Akademie der Wissenschaften mutig auseinander. Er zeigt konträr begangene Wege in dunkler Zeit auf und leistet gleichzeitig einen Beitrag zur Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit innerhalb der Wissenschaft und ihrer Organisationen (Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft vor und nach 1945: Karl Georg Kuhn und Günther Bornkamm, 2009).

(2) Nicht „nur“ die Exegese, auch die Vermittlung der Bibel hinein in den Raum der Kirche und der Gesellschaft liegen Gerd Theißen am Herzen: Er predigt regelmäßig, vor allem in der Peterskirche in Heidelberg, wo er viele Jahre auch im Kapitel saß. Seine Predigten, Meditationen und Bibelarbeiten sind inzwischen in mehreren Bänden erschienen und zeugen von seiner Interpretations- und Gestaltungskraft (Die offene Tür. Biblische Variationen zu Predigttexten, 1990; Lichtspuren. Predigten und Bibelarbeiten, 1994; Lebenszeichen. Meditationen und Predigten, 1998; Erlösungsbilder. Predigten und Meditationen, 2002; Protestantische Akzente, 2008). Viele Pfarrerinnen und Pfarrer haben sich davon inspirieren lassen, viele „Laien“ gern darin gelesen. Genährt von seinen Predigterfahrungen publizierte er eine zunächst auf Französisch veröffentlichte Predigtlehre (Le défi homilétique. L'exégèse au service de la prédication, 1994/Zeichensprache des Glaubens. Chancen der Predigt heute, 1994.²2001). Sie gründet auf biblischen Grundmotiven und deren vielfachen Variationen und will neu zur Predigt motivieren.

Aber auch seine Erfahrungen als Gymnasial- und Hochschullehrer hat G. Theißen fruchtbar umgesetzt. Als erster Fachexeget hat er nicht nur eine Predigtlehre, sondern auch eine Bibeldidaktik veröffentlicht – anregend, ermutigend und ausgesprochen nötig angesichts des derzeit unangemessen niedrigen Stellenwerts der Bibel in diversen Strömungen der Kirche und in Schule und Gesellschaft (Zur Bibel motivieren. Aufgaben, Inhalte und Methoden einer offenen Bibeldidaktik, 2003).

(3) Von authentischer Auseinandersetzung mit der Religionskritik auf der Suche nach der „Wahrheit der Religion“ zeugen G. Theißens Argumente für einen kritischen Glauben oder: Was hält der Religionskritik stand? (1978.³1988). In ihrer Ernsthaftigkeit haben sie so manchen Studierenden davon abgehalten, das Theologiestudium enttäuscht abzubrechen.

In einem systematisch-theologisch ausgesprochen selbstständigen Ansatz unternimmt es G. Theißen ferner, den biblischen Glauben mit Hilfe

evolutionstheoretischer Kategorien zu analysieren und zu interpretieren, so dass Wissen und Glauben aus dieser umfassenderen Perspektive Gemeinsamkeiten erkennen lassen und sich dadurch der zentrale Gehalt biblischen Glaubens neu erschließt (Biblischer Glaube in evolutionärer Sicht, 1984).

Überaus groß ist also das Interessenspektrum von G. Theißen. Sollten wir uns deshalb auf eine Festschrift einigen, die das breite Spektrum seiner Arbeiten aufnimmt? Wir haben diesen Weg nicht beschritten: Die Festschrift sollte sich geschlossen *einem* Thema zuwenden. So wollten wir nur *einen* Faden, der sich durch den bunten Teppich der Veröffentlichungen von G. Theißen zieht, aufnehmen: Jesus – seine Gestalt und Gestaltungen.

Generationen von Studierenden, Lehrerinnen und Lehrern, Schülerinnen und Schülern und Gemeindegliedern in vielen Ländern hat der „Schatten des Galiläers“ begeistert (Der Schatten des Galiläers. Historische Jesusforschung in erzählender Form, 1986.¹³1993), der auch als Hörbuch erschienen ist (2007). Ein bewährtes und viel studiertes Lehrbuch wurde der zusammen mit A. Merz geschriebene „Historische Jesus“ (1996.⁴2011). Viele wichtige – zum Teil recht verstreut publizierte – Forschungen Theißens fasst schließlich der Band „Jesus als historische Gestalt“ (2003) zusammen, den A. Merz zu dessen 60. Geburtstag herausgegeben hat. G. Theißen hat damals intensiv dafür arbeiten müssen, da er seine Beiträge überarbeitet und aktualisiert hat.

Zu seinem 70. Geburtstag soll er nun ein Buch zu Jesus *ohne* Eigenarbeitsanteil bekommen: „Jesus – Gestalt und Gestaltungen“ ist es überschrieben und soll die „Rezeptionen des Galiläers in Wissenschaft, Kirche und Gesellschaft“ zum Thema haben. In den Aufsätzen spiegeln sich viele Forschungsinteressen G. Theißens:

Ein erster Teil wendet sich Jesus und der Jesusbewegung im historischen Kontext zu, ein zweiter Jesus in den Evangelien und ein dritter den Gestaltungen Jesu in den neutestamentlichen Briefen. Ein vierter Teil behandelt Jesus und andere Heilsgestalten in der zeitgenössischen Ikonographie und Literatur. Ein fünfter Teil geht der Geschichte und Theologie in der Jesusforschung nach, ein sechster beinhaltet neue Perspektiven und Ansätze in der Jesusforschung. Der siebte und letzte Teil schließlich hat Gestaltungen Jesu in gegenwärtigen kirchlichen und gesellschaftlichen Kontexten zum Thema.

Die Herausgeber dieses Bandes wurden von Sabine Fartash, Markus Lau und Ralph Hochschild tatkräftig unterstützt: S. Fartash hat die deutschsprachigen Beiträge formal korrigiert, M. Lau inhaltlich. Darüber hinaus hat er die vielfältigen Arbeitsschritte in enger Zusammenarbeit mit dem Verlag und den Herausgebern koordiniert. Vielen herzlichen Dank für die

aufwendige, zuverlässige Arbeit und das kontinuierliche Mitdenken! Dr. R. Hochschild hat maßgeblich bei der Erstellung des Manuskripts mitgewirkt, das Register erstellt und auch darüber hinaus seine Kompetenzen großzügig eingebracht. Dies war eine ausgesprochen große Hilfe für uns! Die redaktionelle Betreuung der englischsprachigen Beiträge lag schließlich in den Händen von David Horrell. Für einen Druckkostenzuschuss haben wir dem Hochschulrat der Universität Freiburg/Schweiz, der badischen und bayerischen Landeskirche, den Landeskirchen von Hessen-Nassau und der Pfalz ganz, ganz herzlich zu danken!

Die Studien erscheinen als hundertster Band in der Reihe *Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus*, deren Mitherausgeber G. Theißen seit Beginn der Reihe im Jahr 1986 ist. Mit großem Interesse und viel Engagement hat er die Bände dieser Reihe begleitet – die Vielfalt der methodischen Zugänge (von der Sozialgeschichte bis zur Ikonographie) und das Anliegen, das Neue Testament im Rahmen der antiken Welt zu verstehen, kommen seinem Wissens- und Erkenntnisdurst entgegen.

Die anderen Mitherausgeber der Reihe haben der Veröffentlichung gerne zugestimmt und der Verlag Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht hat das Projekt in Person von Herrn Jörg Persch und Herrn Christoph Spill freundlich und tatkräftig unterstützt. Vielen Dank auch an die ungenannten Mitarbeiterinnen und Mitarbeiter im Verlag.

Zu dieser Festschrift haben Schülerinnen und Schüler von Gerd Theißen, Humboldt-StipendiatInnen, die er betreut hat, und Kolleginnen und Kollegen Studien beigetragen. Die Beiträge sollen ein kleiner Ausdruck unseres Dankes sein für seine zahlreichen Anregungen, für interessierte und interessante, intensive Gespräche, für sein ernsthaftes, vielseitiges Engagement und freundliches Da-Sein in Fairness und motivierender Zugewandtheit.

Im Februar 2013

Petra von Gemünden

David Horrell

Max Kähler

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Bengt Holmberg

Was Jesus Humble?

Why ask this question? Because one argument in the discussion about whether Jesus had a messianic self-understanding – a “Christology”, as it were – is that he was too humble to make so high claims for himself. According to the prevailing opinion in at least Western culture, Jesus was a man of noble character and therefore cannot have had a very high opinion of himself. “Though saints and Spirit persons are a bit crazy, when judged by conventional standards, they typically do not think of themselves in grandiose terms. I don’t think people like Jesus have an exalted perception of themselves,” says Marcus J. Borg.¹

So, the thinking goes, the very character of Jesus speaks against the probability that he had a “messianic consciousness”, or in other words thought of himself as a uniquely insightful representative or spokesman for God, and ascribed to himself unparalleled revelatory and expiatory powers. The historical Jesus was a sensible and morally responsible person, and therefore must have had a humble, non-assertive and unexalted view of himself and his own importance – a low Christology, if any.

A variant of this approach was recently given in the work of Matthias Kreplin, who argues that although Jesus took himself to be God’s eschatological representative, his own moral teaching with its insistent demand to act humbly constrained him to denounce titles, decline honours, and say as little about himself as possible.² One problem for his reconstruction is that Kreplin

1 In M.J. Borg/N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1999), 146–7; quoted from D.C. Allison, “The Historian’s Jesus and the Church”, in B.R. Gaventa/R.B. Hays (ed.) *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008), 79–95, on p. 89. “What Jesus was like” operates here as a known fact before any evidence *pro et contra* is introduced into the discussion of what Jesus could have thought about himself.

In his book *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 254–63, Allison characterises Borg’s statement as “ahistorical prejudice” and goes on to present and discuss numerous examples, especially from Jewish and Christian history, of people who had exalted perceptions of themselves, without being obviously foolish or mentally ill, but rather intelligent, well educated and personally considerate towards others.

2 M. Kreplin, *Das Selbstverständnis Jesu. Hermeneutische und christologische Reflexion. Historisch-kritische Analyse* (WUNT 2.141; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), which is summarized in his essay “The Self-Understanding of Jesus”, in T. Holmén/S.E. Porter (ed.), *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus. Vol. 3. The Historical Jesus* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011), 2473–516.

comes to the conclusion that Jesus' Yes to Caiaphas' question in Mark 14:62 is authentic. Jesus' acceptance of the title Messiah at this point is however, explains Kreplin, not a claim to high honour. It is given because a denial would amount to an attempt to save his own life, thus shirking the divinely ordained humiliation awaiting him.³

One could ask, of course, if we really know that Jesus did not have "serious psychological difficulties" (as John Knox put it) and was at least slightly insane.⁴ Why not test unflattering ideas about Jesus and see if they have explanatory value? According to Albert Schweitzer, Jesus was a man whose ideas about the world and himself were (proved) simply wrong and of course unusable for a present-day Christian theology and faith. Whether right or wrong in finding a thorough-going eschatology characteristic of Jesus, Schweitzer certainly did not let his 20th century theology determine the outcome of his historical reconstruction of 1st century Jesus.

Schweitzer is, however, an exception. Many exegetes do think that a causally exclusive relation exists between a sane, unassuming humility on one side and a pretentious, "messianic" self-conception on the other. If humility is high, self-esteem and claims to importance must be low, but if someone has a very high opinion of himself, real humility is lacking. Applied to Jesus, this mutual exclusivity means that if Jesus was humble and sane, anything in the gospels indicating that he had a messianic consciousness can only reflect the Christological bias of his followers. So, the question has to be asked: Was Jesus humble?

Can we know whether Jesus was "humble"?

Dictionary definitions of "humble" point to the two sides of this term: (a) the fact of having a low rank or position in society or in an organization (to belong to the *humiliores* in Roman society, for instance), and (b) the inner disposition of having a low opinion of oneself and a high opinion of others,

3 Kreplin, *Selbstverständnis*, 319–20, and "Self-Understanding", 2515. C.H. Dodd once formulated a weighty argument against this expediency interpretation: "Yet a title which he would not deny to save his life cannot have been without significance for him. Messiah he was, in his own sense of the term". C.H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity* (London: Collins, 1971), 111.

4 "Many have worried that if Jesus thought of himself as the Messiah or as destined to return on the clouds of heaven as 'the Son of Man,' then he probably had 'serious psychological difficulties.'" Quoted by Allison, "Historian's Jesus", 89, from John Knox, *The Death of Christ: The Cross in New Testament History and Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), 58, with 67 and 70–1.

towards whom respect is shown.⁵ A humble person is unassuming, respectful towards others, willingly insignificant, the opposite of proud. Humble persons can deny themselves things that they actually own or have a right to, and accept being treated worse than they deserve.

The opposite of being humble is to be self-assertive. A person who when among others takes a lot of social space, demands to be heard and respected, or even obeyed, and who ascribes great importance to his or her own person, action and program, demonstrates the opposite of humility, namely a high self-perception. Surrounding society can consider such self-esteem reasonable and adequate, or as being arrogant and proud in a bad sense. But the verdict on adequacy from onlookers does not in itself affect the fact of a person's self-perception.

But can anything of historical value can be said about the inner disposition and self-understanding of a person that lived two thousand years ago? The answer is yes. It is not a question of attempting a psycho-analysis of Jesus. As with all humans, the overall pattern of Jesus' visible actions and the character of his relations with other people – researchable matters – are viable indicators of at least the contours of a self-understanding. To take just one example: Among visible patterns in the life of Jesus is that he took the role of teacher, called disciples to be with him, and taught publicly. In teaching, he did not avoid conflict and disagreement about important matters, but showed remarkable self-confidence and independence, thus revealing something important about what he thought about himself.⁶

In his illuminating discussion of the question whether the sources we have are sufficient to know anything historical about Jesus, Dale Allison points out the fact that “almost all the material, is open to interminable debate, and precisely because our arguments and criteria are just too weak to resolve much of anything.”⁷ The alternative to simply giving up the attempt to know anything historical about Jesus is, according to Allison, to trust the traditions about Jesus as being generally reliable, and “generally” means in

5 Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. New edition (Harlow, Essex: Longman Group UK, 1987), 511. Low social worth and low self-esteem were closely connected in antiquity, and calling someone humble (*ταπεινός*) was rarely meant as praise, as clearly shown by R. Leivestad in “*Ταπεινός – ταπεινόφρων*”, *NovT* 8 (1966) 36–47.

6 See, for some Nordic examples: S.-O. Back, *Jesus of Nazareth and the Sabbath Commandment* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 1995); T. Kazen, *Jesus and Purity Halakha: Was Jesus Indifferent to Impurity?* (ConBNTS 38; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2002; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010); T. Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins: An Aspect of his Prophetic Mission* (SNTSMS 150; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

7 D.C. Allison, “Historian’s Jesus”, 81. Page references in the following report of Allison’s argument are to this essay. Allison follows a line of reasoning that he used earlier in his book *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), esp. ch. 1, pp 1–77.

its contours and broad features, “certain themes, motifs, and rhetorical strategies that are consistently attested over a wide range of material” (84). It is possible to present catalogues of gospel material that point to a common conviction about Jesus, such as the belief that Jesus’ ministry implemented the defeat of satanic forces or that Jesus had a disciple named Peter. “What counts is not the isolated units but the pattern they weave, or the larger images they form” (85). Allison labels the fact that there are many stories and sayings from various sources with a common overall image of Jesus “recurrent attestation” (87) – and there are many such patterns (on pp. 86–87 he lists nine). Concerning Jesus’ self-conception he catalogues sixteen text units, which together give the image of Jesus seeing himself as the eschatological redeemer of Israel (pp. 89–91).

I am not contending (or denying) that Jesus formulated any of the sayings just cited or that any event or circumstance referred to must be deemed historical. I am rather displaying a pattern. Jesus’ starring role in the eschatological drama is all over the tradition, in words attributed to him and in words assigned to others, in stories as well as sayings.

How should we think about this?

We have three options. First we may trust the sources and decide that Jesus believed himself to be the eschatological redeemer of Israel. Second, not knowing what to make of the sources, we may shrug our shoulders and confess ignorance: we just do not know what Jesus thought about himself. Third, we may distrust and even contradict the sources and assert that Jesus did not think himself to be Israel’s deliverer.⁸

Allison goes on to point out that the third option is not a historically viable position, as it operates in a fashion contrary to ordinary historical method by first disqualifying everything that the ancient sources say, then going on to “use” the same sources and their false memories so cleverly that we see through their obfuscation and discover what Jesus was really up to. In reality, the third option comes close to dispensing with the ancient sources altogether.

But in this matter also the second alternative, “agnosticism[,] is not obligatory” (92). Labelling Jesus the Messiah (*Christos*), the divinely appointed end-time leader of Israel, is done already in pre-Pauline tradition; the Roman authorities are reported to have crucified him precisely on the charge that he pretended to be “King of the Jews” (Mark 15:26), and this squares with a long catalogue of gospel material of various sources and character witnessing to “Jesus’ starring role in the eschatological drama” (91). There is good reason, then, to choose the first alternative and see this as originating in the minds of Jesus and his disciples before Easter.

8 Allison, “Historian’s Jesus”, 91.

So Allison concludes that we really can choose the first alternative, to trust the sources. And the picture they give of Jesus' identity is summarized as follows:

Every piece of evidence we have indicates that from the beginning, Jesus, whatever appellation he did or did not bestow upon himself, was the leader, and everyone else a follower. He was the teacher while everyone else usually listened; he was the main actor while everyone else for the most part observed. There is no tradition in which Jesus is not front and center.⁹

Is such a person humble?

Did Jesus claim to be humble?

Do we find an answer by looking at what Jesus himself said about his humility? According to the first gospel he did say:

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart (ταπεινός τῆ καρδίᾳ), and you will find rest for your souls (Matt 11:29, NRSV).¹⁰

But, even granted that Jesus actually made this statement, here he is not commenting upon his character, his social behaviour or his type of relations to other people. Rather he intends to make clear that the reason why one should learn from him ("take my yoke upon you") is that he knows more about and stands closer to the Father than anyone else, much like divine Wisdom says in Prov. 8:22–9:6 or in Sirach 6 and 51. And this Wisdom-like humility is humility in relation to God, to whom Jesus claims to be completely yielded and obedient. Read in its context, this saying signifies extraordinary closeness to God rather than a low self-perception in relation to other (human) teachers, and does not serve as evidence for humility in an ordinary sense of the word.

There is another difficulty in using a person's statements about one's own humility as evidence for that humility, necessitating a short digression. A person who characterizes himself as "humble" exhibits a somewhat self-reversing logic.¹¹ What is meant by *self-reversal* can be illustrated by

9 Allison, "Historian's Jesus", 92–3.

10 Leivestad points out that the addition of τῆ καρδίᾳ is not an intensification ("really, inwardly humble") but a limitation of the area or aspect within which the said person is lowly, i.e., the heart or inner attitude. The bare ταπεινός is not a synonym to πραῦς, but in most cases retains the connotation of "low, base, miserable", although in some late (mostly Christian) occurrences it has taken on a transferred, positive meaning; Leivestad, "Ταπεινός", 44.

11 Ben F. Meyer gives a clear and illuminating discussion of self-reversals, especially in ch. 3, "Self-Reversals, Horizons, Dialectic" of his book *Reality and Illusion in New*

someone saying: “I am the most intelligent person in the world because my mother says so.” As it is not a demonstration of high intelligence to build such an enormous claim simply on the verdict of one’s dotting mother, the very act of making that statement proves that it is not true. It is a kind of *contradictio in adjecto*, abolishing or annulling what one says by saying it.

The same self-reversal seems to apply to persons talking about their own humility. A former colleague in Lund, who became professor in Göttingen and then bishop in Skara, was known for his parting shot to a coffee-room conversation: “Well, friends, you can say whatever you like about your achievements, but nobody beats me in humility”. This is of course intentional and humorous self-reversal, because it is obvious that (a) for a truly humble person it would be psychologically impossible to bring himself or herself to say such a thing seriously. And (b) it is also logically impossible to brag about your humility without losing it.

The examples above are extreme and obvious cases. But all self-praise is not self-contradictory. Every person reading this can truthfully say: “I am an intelligent person”, while it is more doubtful that every reader truthfully could say: “I am humble”. But – and here I have no reply – is it out of reach for any human being to do so? Could not a case, or better, a person, be imagined from whom such a statement would not be ridiculous, but actually both serious and truthful? Or are we compelled to make a distinction between visible and therefore morally admissible qualities we have like intelligence, physical strength and knowing how to write poetry in Urdu on one side, and on the other side “inner” qualities or virtues such as humility and sheer goodness, which will inevitably be soiled by admitting to have them? Is a good and humble person no longer good if s/he knows and thinks about the fact? This question has to be left unanswered, but in conclusion it might be wiser not to include Matt 11:29 in the evidence against an exalted self-perception of Jesus.

Did Jesus act humbly?

There are elements in the gospel tradition that do evidence a humble attitude of Jesus:

He never uses or advocates violence, except for one short episode in the temple where he forced a stop to the money-changing and sale of sacrificial animals. At all other times he refrains completely from playing in the same

Testament Scholarship: A Primer in Critical Realist Hermeneutics (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 1995).

arena as the politically powerful, the arena of power and violence. He accepts what evil is done to him and does not defend himself against it, nor does he retaliate even verbally with threats or predictions of divine punishment to his tormentors. He lived his own rule: “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (Matt 5:39).

Further, Jesus does not go to the rich, mighty, learned and influential people in his society, but to ordinary people, and especially to those marginalized and unimportant. He has a ministry to all of Israel, but he does not begin from above, but from below in the people, from the grassroots, out in the dirty margins.

Jesus even programmatically chooses bad company, people who do not even pretend to care about the commandments of the Torah – toll collectors, prostitutes, “sinners”.¹² This is notable, since a person who is not highly placed, rich or influential, can at least strive to be righteous in the eyes of God and to keep away from unrighteous and morally polluting people. The Psalms contain several examples of this pious attitude, and being fastidious in choosing one’s company was characteristic of devout Jews, such as the Pharisees. But Jesus freely accepts and seeks company with the unrighteous that a good person should shun, knowing very well that this throws a shadow of impurity and unrighteousness on him as well, thus compromising the God he speaks about and wants to represent.

In line with this, Jesus can quote and in one sense agree with people’s negative characterizations of him, such as being “a glutton and a drunkard” (Q 7:34), which echoes the statute in Deut 21:20 that an adult son who recklessly disobeys his parents, shall be stoned to death. He could say (Q 12:53) that he has not come to bring peace on earth, but the opposite. He will divide families in a way that Micah 7:6 denounces as symptom of national sin before God.¹³ So, Jesus quotes Scripture against himself in a daringly self-ironical manner.

This hardly expresses, however, any humble remorse for the social effects of his ministry, nor is it a proud rebellion against the judgment of the word of God. What Jesus is saying here is something like this: “I know and accept that I look bad, a destroyer of families, one who dissolves all good order. But the turbulence caused by my ministry is part of my sending from God. I have

12 J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew, vol. 3: Companions and Competitors* (Doubleday: New York, 2001) 528: “Nothing could be further from the spirit and the practice of Qumran than Jesus’ free-wheeling wining and dining with the social and religious ‘riffraff’ of Israel, the toll collectors and sinners.”

13 One of the good shocks in reading Gerd Theissen’s *The Shadow of the Galilean* (London: SCM, 1987), is the recognition (from pp. 70–3) that Jesus actually must have caused this kind of family disruption in a number of Galilean families – and thought it right to do so!

not come to bring peace on earth; I have come to bring fire, the kingdom of God. That is more important than anything else!”

Jesus uses a technique of self-stigmatization here, a technique of proclamation through provocation. He willingly plays a role that will draw the criticism of righteous people upon him. But self-stigmatization is a case of inverted logic: He acts as one worthy of contempt and repudiation, taking on a social role of sinner or rebel or norm-breaker. But this is done in the self-confident conviction that he will eventually be vindicated as good, righteous and true, probably by all good people, but definitely and most importantly by God.¹⁴ The ultimate self-stigmatization of Jesus is of course his death, clearly foreseen and deeply feared, but in the end willingly accepted. We will return to that. For now, we conclude that humility does appear in the actions of Jesus, but shot through with and somewhat undermined by self-stigmatization.

Humility in Jesus' teaching

Jesus programmatically taught humility and demanded humble praxis from his own circle. A typical statement is the one about the great reversal: “All who exalt themselves will be humbled (*ταπεινωθήσεται*), and those who humble themselves (*ταπεινώσιν ἑαυτὸν*) will be exalted” (Luke 14:11; Matt 23:12). The saying is repeated as the conclusion to the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple (Luke 18:14).

In Luke 14 Jesus observes the usual status-seeking scramble for honourable placing at the table, and teaches the opposite: one should go for the humble places and actively not seek honour and status. And when inviting people to a festive meal, one should invite people who cannot return the honour. The disciples are told in Matt 23 to avoid titles of honour, as they are all equal brothers, under one Father and one Teacher. The direction is again: practice humility, oppose in action society's “natural” order of rank and everything that upholds that system.

More than once, Jesus' direct and explicit teaching about this is caused by the eager discussion of his disciples of the question who is the greatest

14 On self-stigmatization see the important monograph of H. Mödritzer, *Stigma und Charisma im Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt: Zur Soziologie des Urchristentums* (NTOA 28; Freiburg (Schweiz)/Göttingen: Universitätsverlag/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), which has been taken up by his Doktorvater Gerd Theißen, e.g., in his study on the self-characterization of the Jesus group as “violent” robbers as a case of self-stigmatization, “Jünger als Gewalttäter (Mt 11,12f; Lk 16,16). Der Stürmerspruch als Selbststigmatisierung einer Minorität”, in G. Theißen, *Jesus als historische Gestalt. Beiträge zur Jesusforschung* (FRLANT 202; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003) 153–69.

among them (when Jesus is king, who will be his prime minister?). In Luke 22:24–30 we meet again this upside-down teaching about high and low, where the placing at the table during the Last Supper with Jesus had led the disciples to take up a favourite discussion on rank. Jesus comments:

The kings of the gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom [βασίλεια, here: kingship, royal power], so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

This grandiose vision of Israel's future correlates with nothing in the actual life of the Jesus movement of the first century – and is therefore hardly a retrojection of any leadership or church structure; the Twelve do not appear as a group actually leading anything in the earliest church. So, most likely this unfulfilled saying emanates from Jesus himself, and tells much about the not very humble understanding he had of himself and his mission.

This teaching is paradoxical, however, because (1) it enjoins a far-reaching humility, with reference to Jesus' extreme humbling of himself as the example to emulate, but (2) does so on the basis of a sovereign self-conception of being the future king – a highness that is also given to the disciples. Jesus is high but makes himself low. This lowliness is temporary, a passing phase that will turn into its opposite with eternal power and glory. This combination of highness and voluntary degradation, which we might term a *sovereign humility*, is not a humble, unassuming way to think about oneself.

Evidence of self-assertiveness and high claims

It is not difficult to point to sayings, attitudes and actions from Jesus that strengthen the case for concluding that Jesus had a self-understanding that was not humble in the ordinary sense. A few examples will have to suffice.

(a) As noted above, and denied by very few, Jesus was a teacher in public, and a quite independent and provocative one, too. That kind of public appearance tells any onlooker, also two thousand years later, that here is a man who claims to have very important things to say, because of special knowledge and a special task. As he talks to the people of God about what God is about to do for them and how they should react and change to prepare for it and receive it, we can safely conclude that this preacher-prophet

thought himself in some way sent and authorized by God. He spoke with authority.¹⁵

(b) “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida? For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.” (Matt 11:21). A man who says or in other ways transmits the message: “You disregard what I do and say at your own peril – as you will find out on Judgment Day”, attaches an enormous importance to his own person, words and acts, and cannot be characterized as a humble person in any ordinary meaning of the word.

(c) Many scholars think that what Jesus said about the Baptist and himself in Matt 11:2–19 (par. Luke 7) originates with Jesus himself. There he sees himself as one in a pair, John and Jesus, who are both sent by God to Israel to proclaim the near arrival of God in his power to judge and redeem; both of them will meet deadly resistance because of this. John is the greatest man ever born, says Jesus, and yet he is only the forerunner. The kingdom itself is now trickling forth through what Jesus is doing. Even if his great mentor and near-martyr in prison is having doubts about the identity of Jesus, Jesus cannot swerve from his task but only hope that John will understand, with the help of Scripture (esp. Isaiah), who he really is.

In the text where John from prison puts the question to Jesus: “Are you the one who is to come?” (Matt 11:3 with parallels), it is clear that Jesus’ answer is a veiled Yes. But he gives this answer in the form of showing and inviting John to see how his (Jesus’) miracles of healing are a fulfilment of the scriptural promises from God to liberate his people from all their sufferings. John had imagined that the One who is to come would act more like a cleansing judge against all evil, but Jesus posits his own model for this last-day representative of God: the healer, comforter, liberator and redeemer.

(d) When asked by the Sanhedrin delegation by what authority he dared to disrupt the due process of the Temple (Mark 11:27–33, with parallels), Jesus answers with a reference to the Baptizer. This reply is not, as often understood, a diversionary move or a refusal to answer the question about his authority. It is an argument concerning his authority – and at the same time an attack on the authority of the Sanhedrin. The line of argument goes like this: John baptized on authority from heaven, as everybody knows but you dare not admit. Likewise, I act on authority from heaven, although you from Sanhedrin just admitted – quite truthfully – that you don’t know and cannot recognize such authority even when you see it. So why do you ask?

¹⁵ Leander Keck comments on Matt 7:28, “He taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes”: “Whoever teaches authoritatively is confident that what is taught is utterly true.” L.E. Keck, *Who Is Jesus? History in Perfect Tense* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 101.

(e) The group of twelve close disciples around Jesus is today generally believed to have been historic reality. The remarkable thing about them is that their main function will come into being only in the future, “at the renewal of all things” (Matt 19:28). “I confer on you... royal power, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:29–30). This conferral of royal power is understood by Theißen as sharing out the messianic task to the group nearest around Jesus, a “Gruppenmessianismus”. They will be rulers, each one of them a vassal king over one of the twelve tribes of Israel. It goes without saying that the great King of the restored, complete Israel will then be their master, Jesus.¹⁶

We should conclude, I think, that the obvious “humility” of Jesus in some regards was coupled with remarkable self-confidence, of a sometimes provocative nature. He was not a seeker of ordinary power, and seems to have chosen a marginal, sometimes self-stigmatizing, position in his society. But he also claimed extraordinary access to holy knowledge and closeness to the God of Israel. So his humility is a paradoxical mix of accepting lowly roles and claiming for the future the most glorious roles for himself and his followers.

God as the reference point for Jesus’ humility

The paramount arena for testing the humility or self-assertiveness of Jesus is how and why he met his death as he did. As Albert Schweitzer said, Jesus went up to Jerusalem in order to die, but – we must add – not because he wanted to die (cf. the *δει*-sayings, such as Mark 8:31). The Gethsemane narrative seems to be proof (because so very hard to imagine as an invention by the Christ-believing church) of the fact that Jesus objected to his coming end, right up to the end. The death he foresaw meant an utter humiliation in regard to human society, which he naturally wanted to avoid, but finally accepted as God’s will for him. He humbled himself, *ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν*, as Paul says in Phil 2, he bowed his own will under the will of his Father in heaven, as he had taught his disciples to do, *γενηθῆτω τὸ θέλημα σου* (Matt 6:10).

I would also contend that his obedience was not blind obedience, obeying a cruel fate without having any idea at all why this was demanded of him. Jesus did not doubt that he was valuable in the eyes of the Almighty, which

16 G. Theißen, *Von Jesus zur urchristlichen Zeichenwelt: “Neutestamentliche Grenzgänge” im Dialog* (NTOA 78; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 50.

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