When we look at the history of research, we see that two methodological approaches have been taken in studying the question of how Jesus understood himself.¹ On the one hand, some have attempted to show that Jesus expressed his self-understanding by using a title of sovereignty.² Our first question must therefore be whether Jesus chose to designate himself by means of a title, either one formed by earlier


² Thus e.g., Joachim Jeremias, Neutestamentliche Theologie 1: Die Verkündigung Jesu, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1961), 239–241, and Peter Stuhlmacher, Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1992), 107–125. Frequently, there is an apologetic interest in the background here: the post-East ascription to Jesus of the titles of sovereignty is to be legitimated by showing that Jesus himself used at least one of these titles as a self-designation.
tradition or one that he himself formed (Section 1); in this context, we must pay special attention to the vigorously debated question of the “Son of Man” (Section 2). On the other hand, independently of all titles, scholars have asked what claim is implicit in Jesus’ conduct and in his preaching, since this would indicate which role he regarded as his own (Section 3). These two paths lead to results which at first sight appear contradictory. The task of the concluding argumentation will be to show that this apparent contradiction is in reality deeply rooted in Jesus’ own self-understanding (Section 4).

1. Did Jesus Use One or More Traditional Titles in order to Express His Self-Understanding?

There has long been a broad consensus in the historical-critical research into the life of Jesus that he did not require others to address him as “Messiah” (Hebrew: מֶשֶׁךְ; Aramaic: מָשְׁאֵךְ; Greek: ὁ χριστός),3 “Son of David,”4 or “king (of the Jews), and that he did not designate himself in this way. When we look at the New Testament gospels—including John!—we see at once that almost all the verses in which these titles are attested fall into one of two categories: either these are clearly redactional passages, or else other persons ascribe these titles of sovereignty to Jesus. There are only a very few passages in which Jesus himself reacts positively to one of these messianic titles.5 We must

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3 Cf. e.g., Borg, Meeting Jesus, 29; Ferdinand Hahn, EWNT 3, 1154. This thesis is confirmed by the fact that neither Q nor the Gospel of Thomas employs the title χριστός.

4 Even if Jesus was of Davidic descent (this is discussed by Theissen and Merz, Jesus, 183–184), nothing indicates that he based a claim to be Messiah on this genealogy.

5 These passages are the following:

First, at Luke 19:40 (specifically Lukan material), Jesus welcomes the messianic acclamation by the disciples when he enters Jerusalem. Obviously, however, this logion of Jesus depends on its link with the following prophecy about the future of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41–44), which must be regarded as a vaticinium ex eventu. This means that Luke 19:40 must be seen as a secondary construction.

Secondly, according to the tradition of the Gospel of Mark, when the high priest asks: “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?,” Jesus replies: “I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:61–62; on this, cf. Matt 26:63–64/Luke 22:67–70). It is however scarcely possible to demonstrate the authenticity of the high priest’s question and of Jesus’ reply; the same applies to the similar logia which are transmitted in Matthew and Luke. The high concentration of central Christological titles and theologoumena such as “Christ,” “Son of the Blessed,” “the coming of the Son of Man with the