THE PROBLEM OF THE
Messianic Self-Consciousness of Jesus

By

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It is impossible, within the scope of a brief essay, to say much that is very new or even to repeat in significant proportion what has already been said about this problem, one which has exercised the minds of New Testament scholars from the very beginnings of historical criticism. I have chosen to approach this problem, however, for the very reason that it has not come to rest but has been appearing with renewed urgency and frequency in the most recent exegetical discussion. It has a kind of symptomatic value; it helps, I think, to lay bare some of the crises and challenges in the study of the Synoptic Gospels, and the first part of the paper will consider some of the varying fates encountered roughly since 1900 by the problem of the Messianic self-consciousness of Jesus, loosely and rather widely defined as Jesus' own understanding and interpretation of his message and his mission. At the same time, the problem in one of its most specific and concrete forms, the question whether Jesus applied to himself the title "Son of Man" has very recently come to lively and intense debate after a period of relative dormancy, and we shall turn at the very end of this paper to consider this renewed discussion and its bearing on our total understanding of the Synoptic tradition.

The problem of the historical Jesus is usually said to have begun with HERMANN SAMUEL REIMARUS 1). This teacher of Oriental languages in Hamburg composed a critique of Christianity from a radical deistic position, portions of which were posthumously and anonymously published by LESSING between 1774 and 1778. The last of these so-called "Wolfenbüttel Fragments" bore the

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title, "Concerning the Aims of Jesus and his Disciples"; in it a distinction was sharply drawn between the aims of Jesus and those of his followers. Jesus was a Jewish political aspirant intent on delivering his people from a foreign yoke, an aim in which he completely failed; his disciples, confronted by their leader's defeat but unwilling to accept this shattering of their dreams, stole the corpse of Jesus, invented the message of the resurrection and of a suffering Saviour, and so produced the Church. As an historical reconstruction, the thesis was full of fantasy, but it introduced in a clear and irrevocable way the fundamental distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ proclaimed in the Gospels and by the Church.

Two things should be noted. The first is that the problem did not actually start here. The Reformation had worked out, in its own understanding of Scripture over against the tradition and authority of the Roman Catholic Church, an answer to the question of the identity of the earthly man, Jesus of Nazareth, with the contemporary Lord of the Church. This answer lay in its understanding of the preaching function which it put at the center of the Church's life. But the confidence of Protestantism on this matter had already begun to crack when, in reply to the counterproposals of the Council of Trent, Protestant orthodoxy was driven to elaborate a doctrine of the verbal inspiration of Scripture which, by buttressing the authority of Scripture, could validate and guarantee the continuity between the earthly Jesus and the Christ of faith. But with Reimarus, the dawning of historical inquiry has been so linked with the problem as to raise the question not simply of the earthly Jesus but now of the historical Jesus, i.e. of a Jesus who is accessible and knowable to a strict historical method operating independently from and in conscious repudiation of the dogmatic tradition. In the case of someone like Francis of Assisi, it is not necessary to add this adjective "historical"; it can be assumed that the historical Francis is equivalent to the earthly Francis, Francis himself in contrast to the Francis of pious legend. But in the presence of the Christian claim, this assumption can no longer be taken for granted. To speak of the "historical" Jesus is precisely to raise the challenge whether the "true", the "real" Jesus, Jesus himself, is to be found in the historian's reconstruction or in the theological tradition 1). Throughout the nineteenth century quest

1) Cf. G. Ebeling, Die Frage nach dem historischen Jesus und das Problem