



Divinity of Christ in the Light of the Quest for the Historical Jesus

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Abstract: The flourishing research on the historical Jesus, which has been growing for several centuries, cannot stay without influence on systematic theology. One of the fundamental problems remains whether and to what extent it is possible to reconcile the image of Jesus emerging from historical research with the Christian dogma of the incarnation. This article attempts to answer the question of how belief in the deity of Jesus can be reconciled with the historical approach to him and to his life. The deity of Christ will be presented as a theme not independent of, but closely related to, the historical picture of Jesus. The first part will examine three approaches to the question of the relationship between the historical reconstruction of the person of Jesus and the belief in his deity. The second part will show what kind of belief in the divinity of Jesus is incompatible with the historical-critical approach to the Gospel texts and the life of Jesus. Finally, the third part will attempt to show which understanding of the divinity of Christ is compatible with the historical-critical approach. Belief in the incarnation of God in Jesus seems always possible, even in times of critical historical consciousness. The results of historical research on the person of Jesus not only do not refute such a belief, but also help to find its proper meaning.

Keywords: historical Jesus, Christ of faith, Incarnation, Biblical Christology, divinity of Christ

The figure of Jesus of Nazareth played a great role not only within Christianity, which is obvious, but also in the history of the European culture as such. Through centuries it has become a symbol of values and attitudes relevant to the entire Western world. No one disputes that Jesus became a key figure for the spiritual and moral inquiry of people throughout the Euro-Atlantic cultural circle. However, the interpretation of Jesus – his life, his teachings and also him as a person, is no longer so obvious. This is due to the fundamental difficulty of the presence of two distinct levels, often mixed and confused. Firstly, Jesus was a historical figure, living two thousand years ago in Israel. Secondly, Jesus is the object of a Christian dogma, a theological construct built on historical events. It is never easy to separate historical facts from interpretation. It is even more difficult with regards to what happened in antiquity. And it is especially difficult when we are talking about Jesus – a figure who has been interpreted both religiously and theologically from the very beginning. The only written sources that tell more broadly about Jesus' life are the Gospels, which are, after all, testimonies to the faith of the early Christians rather than meticulous accounts of historical events.

Historical research on the person of Jesus and the historicity of the Gospels cannot remain without influence on systematic theology. One of the basic questions in

this regard is the following: Can the picture of Jesus that emerges from historical research be reconciled with a dogmatic account of his person? Is it still possible to believe in the deity of Jesus in light of the search for the historical Jesus? This paper is an attempt to answer that question. In the first part, I will discuss various views on the possibility of believing in the deity of Christ in the light of the historical-critical approach. In the second part, I will try to show what kind of belief in the divinity of Christ is no longer possible today, precisely because of the discoveries of historical Jesus scholars. Finally, the third part will show which interpretation and which way of thinking about the deity of Jesus is compatible with the historical discoveries.

1. Theological Meaning of the Quest for Historical Jesus

The question of how the historical reconstruction of the person of Jesus of Nazareth relates to belief in his deity is part of a broader question of the relationship between the Jesus Quest and theology or Christian faith in general.¹ Many historical Jesus scholars, as well as many theologians, have commented on the subject and developed various theories that capture this relationship.² Although historians studying Jesus often explicitly state their lack of interest in theology as part of their research, they do acknowledge the significance of their research for theology and Christianity, typically in the introductions or summaries of their works. While there are a variety of positions on this topic, three primary perspectives can be identified. First, it is asserted that a historical exploration of the person of Jesus and the findings of research in this field are incompatible with Christian faith, including any belief in Jesus' divinity. Second, it can be argued that research into the historical Jesus does not preclude belief in the deity of Christ, although the two realms remain wholly separate with no overlap. Jesus Quest has no impact on faith – it neither encourages nor inhibits it, nor does it shape it. The third option is that a historical research on Jesus as a person not only does not rule out the possibility of believing in his divine nature but further assists in appropriately framing this belief. In other words, Jesus Quest is theologically significant because it directs towards an appropriate and intelligible comprehension of Christ's divinity.

¹ On the relationship between Christian theology and Jesus Quest, see: Allison 2009; Ormerod 2020, 389–404; Rowlingson 1965, 329–36; Bradley 1963, 35–48; Weber 1964, 350–54; Fuller 1966, 18–24; Enslin 1962, 219–23; Giambone 2022, 461–76; Boring 1996, 341–54; Holmén 2001, 175–97; Dunn 2005; Stevenson 2019, 291–307; Meier 2017, 461–76.

² Many systematic theologians, especially those dealing directly with Christology, assimilate in their reflection the discoveries related to the quest for the historical Jesus. One of the first theologians of the Catholic denomination who gave due place to the theme of the historical Jesus in his Christology was Edward Schillebeeckx (cf. Schillebeeckx 2014). Another example is the work of Hans Küng: *On being a Christian* (1976). See also: O'Collins 2009.

1.1. The Jesus of History versus the Christ of Faith

There are numerous researchers of historical Jesus who assert that their discoveries contradict the image of Jesus derived from Christian beliefs. This indicates that a reliable historical approach does not support the notion of Christ's divinity. Therefore, Jesus Quest seems to be a means of scientifically rejecting Christian faith. Reliable historical knowledge and the early development of Christian doctrine suggest that belief in the divinity of Christ is implausible.

This approach is championed by Hermann Samuel Reimarus, the pioneer of the quest for the historical Jesus. His central thesis, which was made public by Lessing, is that the Christian faith, which includes the belief in Jesus' divinity, is the result of deception by apostles who were disappointed by their master's tragic end. According to Reimarus, Jesus was actually a pretender who sought political power in Israel and was, in fact, a *de facto* Zealot, seeking to overthrow the Roman occupation.³ "He knew that if the people believed his messengers, they would look for a worldly king, and would attach themselves to him with the conviction that he was this king." (Reimarus 1879, 10–11) Jesus' mission was thus political, and ultimately resulted in complete defeat through crucifixion (Reimarus 1879, 27).

Jesus' hopes were dashed, but this did not mean the end of the Christian movement. The disciples could not accept Jesus' defeat after his death, nor could they give up their dreams of power. So they came up with a resurrection message to affirm that Jesus' cause was still somehow valid (Reimarus 1879, 29).

The disciples then created the church over which they exercised authority. So the goals of the apostles who created Christian doctrine, including the doctrine of the deity of Christ, were very earthly and pragmatic. They wanted to have an important position in society. From the beginning, Christianity was a fraud propagated by those who simply wanted to rule over people (Reimarus 1879, 85–86). In this view, it is clear that the historical deconstruction of the life of Jesus, but also of the origins of the Church, makes it impossible to maintain belief in the divinity of Christ. When belief in this divinity is exposed as the result of deception, it seems impossible to maintain it.

However, not all scholars who deny the credibility of the doctrine of the divinity of Christ on the basis of their historical research consider the emergence of this doctrine to be the result of fraud. Other explanations are also possible. One of them is that the emerging doctrine of the divinity of Jesus in the early Church is a certain blemish on the original content of the Christian message. This blemish stems from a number of linguistic and cultural misunderstandings that arose as the gospel began

³ The theory of Jesus as a zealot has survived to this day, although it occupies a rather marginal place in the contemporary debate. It is represented, for example, by religious studies scholar Reza Aslan, author of the book with the telling title *Zealot* (Aslan 2013). For Aslan (2013, 11), Jesus is above all "Jewish peasant and revolutionary who challenged the rule of the most powerful empire the world had ever known and lost."

to reach Hellenistic circles and leave its Jewish homeland. Many terms, such as “Son of God” or “Lord,” ceased to be understood in Jewish and biblical terms and began to be read in the spirit of the Hellenistic vision of reality (see: Vermès 2013, 237; Fredriksen 2000, 139). It is believed that the direct discussion of Jesus’ deity was a development that would not have been considered by Jesus himself or his first followers (Vermès 1981, 213). “To sum up, the systematizing efforts of contemporary New Testament scholarship appear to agree on two points: (I) The title, ‘lord’, postdates the historical Jesus; (II) its use as an acknowledgement of divinity arises from a Hellenistic milieu.” (Vermès 1981, 111)

In short, Jesus was idolized as a result of the transfer of stories about him to the Hellenistic universe. One scholar who strongly insists on such a theory is Géza Vermès, quoted above. His words capture the essence of this view well: “By the end of the first century Christianity had lost sight of the real Jesus and of the original meaning of his message. Paul, John and their churches replaced him by the otherworldly Christ of faith, and his insistence on personal effort, concentration and trust in God by a reliance on the saving merits of an eternal, divine Redeemer.” (Vermès 2001, 263)

If the belief in the deity of Jesus there is a certain imprint of the original Christian faith, and if this can be deconstructed historically, then the doctrine of the divinity of Christ can be seen as the result of a certain misunderstanding. It was not born out of deception, but out of a certain error, or rather a series of errors, related to the translation of the Jewish concepts of the Gospels into the Greek language and culture, with all its religious and philosophical context. The original Christian faith, untainted by the imprint of the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, is simply the Jewish faith. It is significant that two of the great proponents of this theory, namely Géza Vermès and Paula Fredriksen, converted from Christianity to Judaism. Historical Jesus is, from this point of view, quite different from the Christ of faith. The Christian image of Jesus is completely incompatible with historical truth (Vermès 1981, 17).

There is a third potential explanation of the origin of the belief in the divinity of Christ, which is viewed as incompatible with the image of Jesus resulting from historical research. If this belief did not arise from deception or theological errors, it might have resulted from a hallucination or delusion. From this point of view, it was the first generation of Christians who created the concept of Jesus’ divinity. It was created with completely sincere intentions. And the reason why this orientation appeared in it was because of the Paschal events. This appearance of the risen Jesus became the basis for Christians’ increasingly bold claims about his person.

Gerd Lüdemann is a leading representative of this view. Similar to Vermès, he believes that the post-Easter Church and its doctrines deny the original message of Jesus (Lüdemann 1999, XII).

Where did these doctrines and the Church that proclaims them come from? According to Lüdemann, the development of Christian dogmatics, including the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, began with the events of Easter. The fundamental

thesis of the German exegete is that: “Jesus did not understand himself as Son of God but was regarded as such by his adherents only as a consequence of the resurrection visions.” (Lüdemann 2000, 506)

The disciples reportedly saw visions of Jesus living after his death. They were mostly caused by the psychological states of Peter and Paul, with the former feeling remorse for denying his master, and the latter struggling with internal conflicts related to adherence to Jewish law. The widespread nature of these visions was likely due to their contagious nature. Still others did not personally witness them, but granted credibility to those who had sightings of Jesus. It was these encounters that were so impactful that they prompted reflection on the true identity of Jesus. The culmination of this reflection resulted in the definitive acknowledgment of his divinity (Lüdemann 2000, 692).

If the belief in the divinity of Christ was born of hallucinations, then the discovery of these historical conditions makes this belief doubtful or impossible. Thus, in Lüdemann’s view, too, the discovery of the historical image of Jesus and the origins of the Church makes the doctrine of Christ’s divinity untenable.

Theories of deception, error, and hallucination have been proposed as ways to dispute the validity of the doctrine of Jesus’ divinity based on historical research. However, the prevailing belief among researchers is that faith in Jesus’ divinity cannot be shaken by historical research. Faith and historical research operate on separate planes and do not directly impact each other.

1.2. The Jesus of History Separate from the Christ of Faith

One can argue that there is no direct correlation between the image of the historical Jesus as discovered through research and the doctrine of the divinity of Christ. According to this perspective, the belief in Jesus’ divinity is unrelated to historical conclusions about him. The belief cannot be disproven by the results of historical research, but nor can it be proven. It exists on a different level, not requiring confirmation from Jesus Quest nor facing denial by it.

This perspective appears to be prevalent among both historical Jesus scholars and Christian theologians. A significant figure who represented this perspective was John P. Meier, an author of the substantial work on the historical Jesus, *A Marginal Jew*. Meier states in the first volume of his work: “For the believer, the object of Christian faith is a living person, Jesus Christ, who fully entered into a true human existence on earth in the 1st century A.D., but who now lives, risen and glorified, forever in the Father’s presence.” (Meier 1991, 198)

Representatives of this view sometimes argue that the Jesus Quest does have relevance in theology. Nonetheless, it cannot serve as its foundation or disprove it. Studying the historical Jesus alone is insufficient to challenge one’s belief in his divinity. As Dale C. Allison Jr. (2010, 462) points out: “To do history is not to do theology.”

However, historical research can inspire theology to reconsider certain themes, such as the connection between the actions of Jesus and later actions of the Church. In terms of Christology, the search for the historical Jesus is particularly helpful in revealing the humanity of Christ, thereby serving as a means to combating mono-phycitic tendencies. According to Meier (1991, 199), investigating the historical Jesus enables theology to avoid the pitfall of depicting Jesus solely as a symbol, entirely divorced from actual historical events.

Did Jesus himself have a Christology, or did he somehow understand himself to be divine? For many scholars this does not matter much. Rudolf Bultmann (1958, 16) has already written that Christian dogma is a mythology that cannot be taken literally today, regardless of whether Jesus himself thought of himself in such a mythological way. Other scholars flatly state that the doctrine of the deity of Jesus is in no way embedded in the teaching of the historical Nazarene. This does not make it false by definition, but it certainly favors treating it as something completely separate from the historical truth about Jesus of Nazareth. One of the proponents of this view is Bart D. Ehrman (1998, 243).

Another proponent of the view that belief in the historical Jesus is something separate and distinct from belief in his deity is E. P. Sanders. In the famous conclusion of his most important book on Jesus, the American exegete insists that his historical views do not affect his theological views (Sanders 1985, 334).

To sum up, the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus appears in this light as something additional, which may or may not have some seed in the truth about Jesus of Nazareth. It is simply a separate subject. The explanation of the origins of the belief in the deity of Christ already lies with the historians of Christian doctrine, not with the scholars of the historical Jesus.

1.3. The Historical Jesus as the Christ of Faith

The third direction that can be taken in establishing the relationship between the historical Jesus and belief in the divinity of Christ is some close relationship. Here, too, a certain independence of the one from the other is pointed out. The results of the study of the historical Jesus certainly cannot build Christian faith, nor can they as such refute it. But the independence of the two spheres is incomplete. The historical view of Jesus is relevant to the doctrine of his divinity in the sense that it points the doctrine toward a certain interpretation. There is a certain continuity between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. But it also goes to the point that if one wants to accept faith in the divinity of Christ today, one cannot ignore the results of the study of the historical Jesus. A historical-critical view of Jesus and the Gospels helps to reject certain lines of interpretation of Christian doctrine as no longer acceptable today. On the other hand, it helps to discover the correct and intelligible sense of the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus. This does not mean, of course, that the historical

picture of Jesus leads to belief in the doctrine of his divinity. The point is that it can help purify and properly understand the meaning of that doctrine.

An important figure who, on the one hand, identified with the Christian faith and, on the other hand, uncompromisingly accepted the challenge of a historical analysis of the person and work of Jesus was Albert Schweitzer. His main contribution was to point out the eschatological nature of Jesus' message. According to Schweitzer, Christ anticipated the imminent end of history, a cosmic catastrophe that would end the temporal world (Schweitzer 1910, 388). Nothing of the sort happened, and so, by extension, Jesus must be regarded as someone who made a mistake on a key point. Belief in the divinity of Christ in such a case would therefore have to accept the possibility that he erred as a human being. The apocalyptic current in the interpretation of the historical Jesus is the dominant one in Jesus Quest research today, and even if its proponents do not precisely accept Schweitzer's assumptions, he remains a patron of this theory. Understanding Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet changes the perspective from which we view his divinity. One question that arises is whether it is possible to consider as divine someone who was mistaken about the imminent end of a certain epoch of history and the coming of the visible kingdom of God.

According to Schweitzer, such an apocalyptic picture of the historical Jesus makes his figure difficult for modern man to accept. It is impossible to separate the historical approach from the Christian faith. Influenced by historical and exegetical research, a new image of Jesus comes into view that poses no small challenge to the established patterns of Christological thought (Schweitzer 1910, 403).

One figure who made a strong statement in his work on the relationship between the historical study of Jesus, theology and belief in the deity of Christ was James D. G. Dunn. He wrote about hermeneutics, which allows a bridge to be built between historical and theological approaches. The historical study of Jesus is related to the belief in the deity of Christ and helps to interpret that belief (Dunn 2003, 13).

According to Dunn, the post-Easter faith, which includes the assumption of the divinity of Jesus, cannot be explained without assuming that already during the lifetime of the historical Jesus there was a conviction of the special presence of God in his actions and teachings. There is thus an unbroken continuity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Dunn concludes that it would be difficult to explain the origin of the later faith and teaching of the church if it were not directly inspired by an impulse from Jesus himself (Dunn 2003, 892).

Dunn is not the only contemporary researcher who has framed the relationship between historical research on the person of Jesus and belief in his divinity in this way. Two of the most prominent contemporary historical Jesus scholars who draw theological conclusions from their research and openly identify with some form of Christian faith (including belief in the divinity of Jesus) are John Dominic Crossan and N.T. Wright.

In his writings, Crossan draws attention primarily to the anti-imperial and social dimensions of Jesus' message. He emphasizes such elements of the Nazarene's teaching as the renunciation of violence and the abandonment of hierarchical socio-economic relations. He also reads in this context the emerging belief in his divinity soon after his death. Jesus was given titles similar to those previously used to describe Caesar Augustus and later, to a large extent, his successors (Crossan 2008, 28).

Belief in the divinity of Christ thus had a clear socio-political context and was a certain provocation. This is or may be the meaning of this belief today. In any case, it is possible, and historical research helps to better understand its meaning. Crossan understands the divinity of Christ metaphorically rather than in terms of some hard metaphysics. The belief in the divinity of Christ is mythical, it is based on a tradition that speaks of the embodiment of divine wisdom (Crossan 1991, 232). According to Crossan, Jesus should no longer be seen as a mediator between God and man, but rather as the initiator of the kingdom of God, in which there is no longer any mediation. At the same time, there is no contradiction between the vision of the historical Jesus and the belief in his divinity, since this belief presupposes that Jesus is fully human and also fully God. What is problematic is the context in which the original Christological dogma was formulated at the Council of Nicaea (Crossan 1991, 417–26). But the most important thing about believing in the Incarnation is not the Incarnation itself, but the fact that it happened in Jesus. It is that Jesus is the embodiment of God and not, for example, Caesar. For it is a question of who God is. What does it say about him that his incarnation is precisely Jesus of Nazareth? For Crossan (1998, 586), the most important question is ultimately this: "Is your God a God of justice or of revenge?"

Whether one agrees with Crossan's theories or not, one can find in his work an inspiring conviction that historical research on the person of Jesus not only does not exclude the possibility of believing in his deity, but can help to better understand and express that belief.

The same is true of the thought of N. T. Wright, whose views are otherwise radically different from those challenged by Crossan. Wright portrays Jesus primarily as a Jewish messiah whose mission was to renew and reunite the tribes of Israel for the coming reign of God. Jesus was God's anointed one who would rule a renewed Israel in Yahweh's name. The Nazarene embodied God's return to Zion not only in isolated prophetic gestures but in his entire life and actions. It is in this key that Wright understands the incarnation, which for him is primarily a biblical category that fits into the whole dynamic of salvation history, rather than a metaphysical claim. Wright thus leads his readers to a certain reinterpretation of the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, revealing its biblical and historical dimension. "What I have argued for elsewhere, not to diminish the full incarnation of Jesus but to explore its deepest dimension, is that Jesus was aware of a call, a vocation, to do and be what, according to the scriptures, only Israel's God gets to do and be." (Wright 2010, 118)

Belief in the divinity of Jesus doesn't contradict the results of historical research on his person, and what's more, as the British exegete shows, it is this contemporary research that helps to better understand the meaning of Christian doctrine. According to Wright (1996, 660), thanks to the historical approach, thinking about the incarnation is no longer an abstract consideration of a generic "God," but the culmination of the entire biblical tradition, a kind of crowning achievement of the Jewish faith.

2. What Kind of Faith in the Divinity of Jesus Is No Longer Possible

As can be seen, there are three basic approaches to framing the relationship between Jesus Quest and belief in the divinity of Christ. According to the first, the results of historical research prevent, ridicule, or deconstruct the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus. This approach seems wrong on the most basic methodological level. Even if someone succeeds in uncovering the roots of the belief in the deity of Jesus and determines that this belief is based on deception or error, by the same token that person has not proven that Jesus was not the incarnate Son of God. Historical methods obviously cannot prove the divinity of Christ, that much is obvious. Just as it would be impossible to prove by historical analysis that Jesus was divine, so it is impossible to prove that he was not divine. Historians, as historians, cannot judge the authenticity of the dogmas of faith.

According to the second approach, the historical approach to the person of Jesus and the belief in his divinity are two completely separate realities that do not correlate in any way. The advantage of this approach is a certain methodological clarity. In fact, no historical research can condition one to believe or not to believe in the divinity of Jesus. One can profess this belief completely independently of the results of historical research. Complete independence of these two spheres, however, is an exaggeration. Belief in Jesus as the incarnation of God presupposes a certain concreteness of his humanity and his history. This history is therefore not irrelevant to theology. Who Jesus of Nazareth actually was, what he did, and what he taught – these facts are relevant to belief in his divinity. Historical knowledge can neither create nor disprove this belief. It can, however, influence how it is understood and experienced. Jesus Quest is relevant to the doctrine of Jesus' divinity in the sense that it becomes a certain tool for believers to revise and deeper interpret that doctrine. Since it is Jesus and not someone else who Christians claim was God incarnate, knowing who this Jesus was cannot remain unimportant. To discover the truth about the historical Jesus is for a Christian to reflect on whether and why he believes in his divinity. It seems, then, that scholars like Schweitzer, Dunn, Wright, and Crossan are correct in

showing that a historical approach to Jesus must inform the understanding and experiencing of the Christian faith.

The assimilation of the historical-critical approach to the Gospels and the reconstruction of the life of Jesus therefore has implications in the area of understanding the deity of Christ (Schillebeeckx 2014, 21). First, it is worth looking at which lines of understanding of the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus seem untenable in light of contemporary historical and exegetical knowledge. It is clear that there are no small differences between the theses of scholars that have been examined by the historical Jesus. As can be seen from the assessment of the analyzes so far, attention should also be paid to the topic of deity by researchers who have different comments. Among those that say that it is possible to point out the critical-historical address to Jesus with faith in his divinity, there are strong differences, as can be seen after the discussion of Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright (2007). All this, however, does not change the fact that one can try to determine certain directions in which the doctrine of the divinity of Christ better or worse harmonizes with the historical reconstruction, whatever its details. Some ways of approaching the dogma of the divinity of Jesus harmonize better with the critical-historical approach to the Gospel, others less so. It is worth considering what interpretations of this doctrine seem difficult to maintain in the face of a critical reading of the New Testament.

The first element that has traditionally often been associated with the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus and that seems untenable in the light of the historical-critical approach is supranaturalism. By supranaturalism we mean the view that there are two levels of reality, the natural and the supernatural. Supernatural beings intervene in the physical world, crossing the boundary between one dimension of reality and the other (Tillich 1967, 6–7). The supernaturalist interpretation of Jesus' divinity assumed that in his life there was such a transition of a supernatural being into the temporal world. The incarnation is understood here as the miraculous transition of a divine being into the natural world. In turn, the actions of Jesus, especially the so-called miracles, are seen as manifestations of supernatural power transcending the order of the temporal world. It is these miraculous acts that prove Jesus to be more than human. All the circumstances of Jesus' life are surrounded by a certain aura of supranaturalism, from his conception and birth to his death.

This whole supernaturalistic interpretation of the Gospels is in deep crisis today, even though there is no shortage of ardent adherents.⁴ Historical-critical exegesis over the past few centuries has shown that all the miraculous descriptions found in the Bible, including the Gospels, can be deconstructed by uncovering the theological

⁴ These are especially analytical philosophers of religion who identify with Christianity, the most significant of whom are Richard Swinburne and Alvin Plantinga. See: Plantinga 2006, 495–504; Swinburne 1977. Regarding the supernaturalistic approach to the interpretation of the Gospel and the Bible as such, see: Plantinga 1998, 223–78. On miracles understood supranaturalistically, see: Swinburne 1989; Swinburne 1970; Larmer 2013.

motivations of their authors. It was not so much the extraordinary events that created the theology, but – at least very often – it was theology that created the descriptions of the extraordinary events (Ehrman 1998, 29).

This is also true of the miracles of Jesus described in the canonical gospels. Their descriptions are a kind of narrative theology, a legendary testimony of faith in the power of Jesus. They are all influenced by the faith of the post-Easter Church and the spiritual experience of faith in the Risen Lord who lives and acts in his community. It is hard to deny that the historical Jesus performed healings and exorcisms. But it is different with the so-called miracles over nature. It is difficult today to argue that such events as the multiplication of loaves or walking on water literally took place in reality. Rather, they are narrative expressions of the Church's post-Easter faith in Jesus Christ, Lord of heaven and earth, who gives himself in the Eucharist.⁵

All the extraordinary events that make up the supernatural interpretation of the Gospels are read differently today than they were in past centuries, as they are interpreted in the light of critical-historical exegesis. One of the pioneers of the Jesus Quest, David Strauss, has played a major role in this regard.⁶ He pointed out three basic ways of reading the Gospel texts in which spectacular supernatural elements appear.⁷ First, these texts can be read as a literal record of historical events, and therefore as a kind of supernatural history. Everything happened literally as described in the Gospels. A supernatural factor intervened in the story, and the evangelist described it. This is essentially how the Gospel texts were read for most of the history of Christianity until the 18th century. The second way is to still read the Gospels as a general record of historical events, but laced with some supernatural interpretation. One must patiently wade through this misinterpretation to get to the actual events, which can be explained in a perfectly rational way. In this view, the Gospels are read in the spirit of naturalistic history. For example, Jesus did not walk on a sheet of water, but on stones hidden in the water, and the multiplied loaves are actually sandwiches that the hearers brought with them and decided to share with others, influenced by Jesus' teachings. A third way of reading the miraculous accounts in the Gospels is to understand them as mythical stories. This is the reading proposed by Strauss, and it remains to his credit. In the mythic reading, the idea is to treat the supernatural descriptions of the gospels not as based on historical facts, but as created by the authors to convey some theological content. So, when we deal with episodes of this kind in the Gospels, we can assume that they are not a record of actual events, but are narratives that convey the theology of the authors or editors of the Gospels. Thus, there is no need to consider what the multiplication of the loaves

⁵ As writes Meier (1994, 970): "all these stories appear to have been created by the early church to serve various theological purposes."

⁶ For different view on the role of Strauss, see: Wright 1996, 49–50.

⁷ Strauss describes his approach compared to competing approaches in the introduction to his work (Strauss 1902, 39–92).

actually looked like – this episode is purely literary. What guided the Christian writers who told such stories about Jesus? It seems obvious that they wanted to present Christ in the light of their already advanced theology. But Strauss points to another specific source for these stories, the Old Testament (Strauss 1902, 83–84). Jesus is supposed to be the one in whom all the biblical prophecies were fulfilled. Therefore, the evangelists create episodes in which biblical predictions seem to be fulfilled in Jesus. For example, the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves is an analogous event from the life of Elisha applied to Jesus (Strauss 1902, 517–18).

Certainly not all of the spectacular episodes in the Gospels can be treated as mythical stories. Of course, the miraculous healings performed by Jesus are most likely rooted somehow in history. Most scholars of the historical Jesus agree that he performed exorcisms and healings that were considered miraculous in the eyes of his contemporaries.⁸ Contrary to a fairly widespread belief, however, the miracles performed by Jesus did not serve as an argument for his divinity two thousand years ago, nor can they serve as such an argument today. In antiquity, miraculous deeds were attributed to a number of important people, which did not in itself make these individuals incarnate gods. Moreover, according to the New Testament, miracles were also performed by the apostles, whose divinity Christianity never spoke of. Undoubtedly, the miracles described in the Gospels are intended by the writers of these texts to point to Jesus' special role, but not directly to his divinity. As Sanders (1993, 132–33) has noted, the idea that Jesus' miracles are intended to prove his deity is both theologically and historically incorrect. Of course, even if, thanks to such exegesis, we can discover more or less precisely the theological motivations of the authors of miracle stories, it does not mean that the most important and frequently narrated extraordinary events (exorcisms, healings) are merely theological creations and not true sources of theology. However, critical awareness requires a certain reserve here. Yes, Jesus' miracles have theological significance, but it is not obvious to what extent their Gospel descriptions are of a historical nature. Therefore, it does not seem wise to attach too much importance to them on the theological level. And it certainly does not seem a good idea to see Jesus' miracles as supposed proof of his divinity.

It seems impossible, therefore, to present the divinity of Christ as consisting in his transcending human nature. Jesus was not called God or the Son of God by the early Christians because he transcended the possibilities of human nature by performing miraculous signs. Nor was he so called because his life was accompanied by extraordinary events that transcended the laws of created reality. It is enough to note that Paul, who was one of the first to begin to move toward a kind of belief in the deity of Jesus, wrote nothing at all about his miracles.

⁸ See for example: Meier 1994, 970; Lüdemann 1999, 103; Vermès 1981, 24–25; Allison 2010, 267; Fredrikson 2000, 99; Ehrman 1998, 199.

The popular vision, according to which some of Jesus' actions were purely divine while others were human, is not only untenable in the light of critical exegesis, but it is and always has been theologically incorrect. It is not an orthodox view, just the contrary, it is close to the heresies of docetism and monophysitism. In the orthodox view, Jesus, as the incarnate Son, has two natures that do not mix. He is not God in the form of a man, but an actual man in whose life God was fully revealed and incarnated. The inseparability and indivisibility of divinity and humanity in Jesus is indicated by the dogma of the Council of Chalcedon.

[We confess] one and the same Christ only begotten Son, our Lord, acknowledged in two natures, without mingling, without change, indivisibly, undividedly, the distinction of the natures nowhere removed on account of the union but rather the peculiarity of each nature being kept, and uniting in one person and substance, not divided or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son only begotten God Word, Lord Jesus Christ, just as from the beginning the prophets taught about Him and the Lord Jesus Himself taught us, and the creed of our fathers has handed down to us. (Denzinger 1955, 61)

Thus, the divinity of Jesus cannot be sought in what transcends or contradicts his humanity; on the contrary, it must be sought in and through that humanity. The search for the historical Jesus, combined with the deconstruction of the supernatural dimension of the Gospels, paradoxically helps to approach orthodoxy. The vision of Jesus as sometimes assuming humanity and acting as God in the world is not orthodox.

Another important element is the question of Jesus' consciousness. The traditional view emphasized that Jesus actually felt God and had divine consciousness.⁹ In the light of modern exegesis, such a view seems untenable. Most of Jesus' statements that somehow indicate his divine character and could be seen as an expression of divine consciousness come from the Gospel of John. However, as is well known, this gospel was written significantly later than the other canonical gospels and expresses a theological consciousness that is already much more mature and developed. John's Jesus teaches very different things from the synoptic Jesus, not to mention the historical Jesus. It is widely believed that the words of the Jesus of John have little to do with the teachings of the historical Jesus.¹⁰ Even if John's Gospel contains some authentic historical elements independent of the synoptics, most scholars agree that the high Christology found in the speeches of John's Jesus did not come from the historical Jesus. Thus, the statements indicating the divine character of the Master must

⁹ Thomas Aquinas did not even consider it necessary to argue that Jesus had divine knowledge; on the contrary, he argued that Jesus possessed human knowledge in addition to divine knowledge. *Summa theologiae* III, q. 9, a. 1 (Thomas Aquinas 1923, 763).

¹⁰ For the critique of this conviction, see: Anderson, Just, and Thatcher 2007.

be regarded as an expression of the faith of the community of the beloved disciple rather than a record of Jesus' actual consciousness.

Who did Jesus really think he was? Certainly a prophet, perhaps a kind of Messiah (Allison 2010, 286). But he certainly did not think of himself as God directly. Thus, the study of the historical Jesus forces us to abandon the image of a man who was in fact God in human flesh, looking at the world with God's eyes and God's knowledge, and demonstrating his divine power from time to time. However, as already mentioned, this image was never the orthodox theology of the incarnation. What cannot be maintained and what can no longer be believed in the light of the research on the historical Jesus is not Christian orthodoxy, but monophysitism, which sees in Christ essentially and directly God, for whom humanity is only a certain mask.

The search for the historical Jesus strongly exposes and explores the humanity of Jesus, showing the cultural and social conditions of his life and teaching. Instead, it strips Jesus of his supernatural robes, showing that they were largely imposed on him by later theology. But does this deconstruct the doctrine of Christ's deity or make it impossible to maintain? It does not seem to. It merely refutes a certain way of thinking about the deity of Jesus, a way that has never been orthodox.

3. What Kind of Faith in the Divinity of Jesus Is Still Possible

Faith in the divinity of Christ is also possible when one is aware that the Gospels are not historical reports, but texts filled with the theological perspective of the Church at the end of the 1st century. A critical-historical approach to the person of Jesus does not exclude belief in his deity. Moreover, it seems that we should agree with researchers such as Dunn, Wright and Crossan, who show that the very image of the historical Jesus can influence how the meaning of the doctrine of his deity is understood. In this part of the article, directions of thinking about the divinity of Christ will be proposed, which harmonize with the historical approach to his person.

Studies of the historical Jesus help to see more clearly the humanity of Jesus with all its conditions. They show Jesus simply as a historical figure, in contrast to the centuries-old tradition of seeing him in a theological key, relegating his real humanity and its historical conditions to the background. It was the humanity of Jesus and his real history that was the moment of human encounter with God incarnate (Schillebeeckx 2014, 630). If a faith in the divinity of Christ is still possible, it is certainly not faith that puts his human destiny into brackets, but one that goes through and accepts this human destiny completely.

Past centuries of theology have accustomed Christians to think about Jesus in a primarily dogmatic key. Thinking about the deity of Christ often meant simply the deity of a supernatural being once incarnated in a human being. In such a view, it

didn't matter so much what kind of person he was incarnated in, or what that person was like. Modern historical research, on the other hand, shows and focuses on a living figure of Jesus, with specific goals, his specific historical context, and his specific actions. This creates an opportunity to better understand why it was Jesus who began to be called divine. It is in the life of Jesus, and not next to or above that life, that we look today for ways to believe in his divinity. Faith in the deity of Christ must contain re-lecture of the life of historical Jesus. We are aware that "without historical Jesus there will be no Christ of faith." (Rusecki 2006, 213)

Looking at Jesus as a story provides the proper perspective for thinking about the incarnation. The story of Jesus reveals God by becoming his embodiment.¹¹ Divinity of Christ, then, is not so much to about some metaphysical transformation of eternal being into temporal being as it is the full embodiment of God in human history. To believe in the divinity of Jesus is to perceive in the history of this particular person the manifestation of God himself. Thus, the historical study of the person of Jesus is of great importance for faith in his divinity. Although they cannot establish it (nor can they disprove it), they are important because they show the believer how God was revealed in the life of Jesus.

Therefore, thinking about the divinity of Jesus is still possible when placed in a historical and narrative key. Divinity is not something that mixes with the human story of Jesus and makes it extraordinary. Rather, it is what is revealed in the truly human, ordinary story of Jesus. Metaphysical categories are thus secondary to historical categories. To speak of the Logos incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth is already a conclusion and a kind of meta-reflection, not the essence of the matter. The essence of belief in the divinity of Jesus, on the other hand, is to see in his story the embodiment of God's plan for the world and for humanity.¹²

To seek the deity of Jesus not beyond his humanity, but precisely through this humanity and through his human history, is in line with Christian orthodoxy and at the same time fits better with all biblical theology than metaphysically centered considerations of the incarnation. Moreover, in such a view Christology simultaneously becomes a kind of safeguard for the primacy of negative theology.

The Council of Chalcedon, which for centuries became the norm for Christian Christological reflection, makes clear that Christ's divinity is not mixed with his humanity. Rather, he is the second ground, the message of that humanity. He appears through it, is united with it, but is not something separate to be pointed out and distinguished. Thus, Chalcedon encourages us to seek the divinity of Christ through

¹¹ This is the basic idea of the popular book of Roger Haight: *Jesus: Symbol of God* (1999).

¹² This direction of thinking about the incarnation was proposed by Paul Tillich in a famous article on the subject. He stated there that: "It follows that essential Godmanhood can manifest itself within existence only in a human being and as a personal life." (Tillich 1992, 313) The Incarnation is therefore a manifestation in the concrete life of Jesus of the ideal of Godmanhood, the final union of man with God, and thus the ideal of humanity.

his humanity. For it is through the human Jesus that we have access to the God revealed in him. The search for the historical Jesus can thus be a way of authentically discovering his divinity. It is not a matter of finding something inexplicable or supernatural in the story of Jesus, but of seeing God revealed in his humanity. It is not supernaturalism, but precisely the historical-critical approach that brings us closer to an authentic recognition of God in Jesus Christ.

The historical understanding of the divinity of Jesus, which takes precedence over metaphysical explanations, is also closer to the whole dynamic of biblical theology. The Bible is precisely about God's presence in the history of the world, and especially in the history of Israel. The incarnation of God in Jesus is a kind of culmination of the whole biblical dynamic. God no longer incarnates himself in his people, but specifically and finally in one man, the Messiah, who is Israel in his own person. The prophetic aspect of the incarnation is also important, as N. T. Wright points out. The notion of a prophetic act, that is, an act performed by a prophet in which God's purpose is revealed, is familiar. Precisely in this way the divinity of Jesus can be thought of. It is no longer a specific act that embodies God, but the whole life of the prophet becomes the story of God. More specifically, it is the story of God's return to Zion to save Israel and transform the whole world (Wright 1996, 657–60).

What is also important is the socio-political dimension of the doctrine on the divinity of Christ. The additional ten dimensions are very important to the Gospel and the Bible as such, while later developments in science became known. Crossan seems to be right in reopening it. Calling Jesus God, Lord or Son of God was from the beginning in opposition to calling these devices of the Roman Caesar. It can be said that even today the teachings about the divinity of Jesus are polemical in the face of the threat of the Caesars, to the world of power, money and violence. Recognizing that Jesus is Lord is admitting that God is (as Jesus was) on the side of love, humility and goodness, that he is on the side of people, not the structures of power, exploitation and violence.

Another thing is the connection between Christology and negative theology. The incarnation is strongly associated with positive theology. It is, after all, the moment of God's revelation, his appearance in the flesh. In fact, however, the incarnation is the culmination of apophatic theology. When we look at Jesus as a historical figure, we see that God always remains invisible and hidden. His presence in Jesus does not mean that God is defined and materially perceived. Rather, the incarnation teaches us that God remains forever a mystery that can never be accepted as a fact, but is revealed through facts. God reveals himself in the life of Jesus, and this is the fullest access we have to him. It is not that we know God beforehand, understand his qualities and nature, and then this already known God reveals himself in Christ. On the contrary, it is the story of Jesus that reveals what God can be. Believing in the divinity of Jesus means that we have no other access to God than through human life. God is most fully revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, and it is on this basis that Christians

can say something about God. He remains an incomprehensible mystery, but as this mystery he gives himself to us in the life of Jesus.

The approach to the theology of the incarnation presented here may seem risky because it raises the question of what made Jesus different from other great saints and figures from salvation history. After all, God has revealed and continues to reveal his action and presence through the lives of many prophets throughout history. In fact, this is the advantage, not the disadvantage, of the optics proposed here. The incarnation is not some phenomenon taken out of the normal course of history, but the total fulfillment of creation and its purpose. Man's vocation is to embody God's plans. The incarnation of the Logos in Jesus Christ is the total, final fulfillment of what God intended for every person. Christology then appears as anthropology fulfilled. This way of thinking about the incarnation is consistent with the Christian tradition, especially with that trend that showed the very teleology of creation, and not only the need for redemption as the motive for the incarnation of the Word of God. The perception of Christology as fulfilled anthropology is consistent with the great achievements of 20th century theology, for example with the thought of Karl Rahner. He wrote that "Christology may be studied as self-transcending anthropology and anthropology as deficient Christology." (Rahner 1963, 164)

As for the question whether such a view does not relativize the importance of Jesus to other figures in salvation history, the answer is: No, because it was in the life of the Master from Nazareth that all fullness was revealed, in an unattainable and unique way. In Jesus, what was only partially revealed elsewhere was revealed in a final way (Tillich 1951, 137). Although the uniqueness of Christ does not consist in being someone completely different from other people, but in being a fully fulfilled man, perfectly embodying God's plan. In him it is clear that "God is the last word of man and man is the final sense of God's speech." (Bartnik 2012, 708)

Conclusion

Belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ is possible at any time, in any era, and in any context. Like any religious belief, it cannot be overturned by cultural progress or scientific discovery. It can only, and probably must, change and take on a different form. In every age it is possible to believe that God was revealed and incarnated in Jesus. In every age, however, this belief must seek a different interpretation and different means of expression, taking into account the current cultural, social, and intellectual context. The search for the historical Jesus is undoubtedly part of this context today. The historical-critical study of the person of Jesus and the texts of the New Testament cannot be without influence on the understanding of faith and its living in the modern world. Today, faith in on the divinity of Christ, as well as

reflection on it, called Christology, today must take into account the achievements of critical-historical exegesis and the findings of historians who reconstruct the biography of Jesus of Nazareth.

It is not that modern scientific research makes belief in the divinity of Jesus impossible, but it is not that they are irrelevant to it either. The image of the historical Jesus that emerges from the research of scientists representing various views and differing in their analyzes is certainly primarily an image of a specific man. The humanity of Jesus ceases to be a theory and a slogan, and begins to be flesh and blood. Jesus quest shows Jesus as fully human, and thus helps to reject supernaturalism in the interpretation of him as a person, seeing him as someone who goes beyond the temporal order of the world. The quest of the historical Jesus helps to finally reject monophysitism, in which Jesus is *de facto* simply God in the guise of a man. Jesus is a man in whose life God fully revealed himself. However, this is not a half-god, some hero walking on earth straight from Greek mythology. Jesus quest helps us see Jesus as a man with his own struggles and development, his own context and conditions, his own life drama. It was in this human life that God revealed himself to man. When we talk about the incarnation, we do not think first of all about some metaphysical transformation, but about the revelation of God in the ordinary human life of Jesus. Thus, we think of God as also present in our lives. The religion of the incarnation does not alienate man and does not detach him from his existence, nor does it transport him to an alternative world or to some afterlife. It constantly refers him to his own life and it is in this life that it makes him look for God incarnate. A historical look at Jesus not only does not refute the faith, but actually helps it find its proper identity, exposing supernaturalistic monophysitism.

The quest of the historical Jesus shows not only Jesus as a man, but also as a very specific man, advocating specific values and a specific experience of relationship with God and people. Believing in the divinity of this Jesus is also recognizing that he was right in judging the human world and showing an alternative way of life. He was not wrong in preaching countercultural, shocking content like that contained in the Sermon on the Mount. The belief in the divinity of Christ is ultimately not so much a doctrinal theory as a complete adherence to Jesus and following him. It is a question of changing lives and changing the world, it is a thoroughly practical issue.

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