

Who was Jesus?

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The historical person Jesus of Nazareth - beyond the accounts in the creeds and the Gospels, which are all characterized by religious belief - is the focus of Tobias Hägerland's dissertation from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Jesus' proclamation of the forgiveness of sins is the key to understanding how he perceived his own identity: as the Prophet-Messiah of the end-time, with a message to the Jewish people in the first century CE.

In order to extract historical information from the strongly tendentious biblical stories about Jesus, and to understand how this historical material may have been interpreted in an early Jewish environment, Tobias Hägerland has studied numerous source texts in different languages including Greek, Aramaic, Coptic and Ethiopic. He also builds on the research conducted internationally today on a common academic basis into the historical Jesus.

"The texts about Jesus and the [forgiveness](#) of sins are good examples of how the Gospels weave together historical information with religious notions and interpretations," explains Tobias Hägerland. Jesus' view on forgiveness, as shown in the text material, differs on a number of points from the way the first Christians thought about forgiveness, and this points towards the existence of a historical core in the texts. On the other hand, the story in the Gospels of the very negative reaction of opponents of Jesus to his actions on the issue is not historically credible in light of other Jewish texts about human mediation of forgiveness. Here, a comparison with ancient school rhetoric shows how the polemic features in the story may have been caused by rhetorical strategies rather than by

a historical conflict between Jesus and the scribes of his day.

The dissertation draws attention to a couple of previously partly overlooked passages by early Jewish authors who appear to express in words the notion that prophets could forgive sins - that is to say convey forgiveness from God to human beings. The fact that the historical Jesus was perceived as a prophet by himself and others is also one of Hägerland's conclusions.

"But not just any prophet, 'the Anointed One of the Spirit', the last and greatest prophet that God, according to a common view, would send to the people of Israel. As a miracle worker and preacher, Jesus entered into this role in different ways, including by preaching and conveying forgiveness."

Source: University of Gothenburg

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