

Jesus appeared as, above all, an eschatological prophet, a proclaimer of the imminent reign or rule of God, who conceived his own proclamation and the summons to repentance and faith that was of a piece with it to be God's decisive word in the last hour. Although he hardly called for faith in his own person, in the way in which he is later represented as doing, say, in the Gospel of John, he evidently did call for faith in his word as itself the word of God confronting his hearers with the definitive decision of their lives.

Jesus also appeared as a teacher or rabbi. His call to repentance and faith was not only made implicitly by proclaiming the imminence of God's reign or rule, and explicitly as an imperative summons, but also—and likewise implicitly—by definitively interpreting the will of God. "You have heard it said . . . , but I say to you."

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Jesus is presented by the earliest witnesses as representing his own proclamation and teaching, as well as his summons to repentance and faith, as the decisive act of the God whose reign or rule was even then breaking in. Even though he does not explicitly think and speak of himself as the Christ or the Son of Man, he does point to himself and his word as being of decisive significance, in that even now, through them, God is decisively confronting his hearers with the final decision for or against God's gift and demand. Thus, even in the earliest stratum of Christian witness accessible to us, what is meant by Jesus is the one who at least implies the kind of claim of which the church's later christological assertion is the explication.

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The basic motif expressed by Jesus' proclamation and teaching of the reign or rule of God and his summons to repentance and faith, as well as by his implicit claim for their decisive significance, is the motif of God's unconditional love as the gift and demand of authentic existence in faith and in returning love

for God and for all things in God. Thus the earliest traditions present Jesus formally as the eschatological *kairos* and materially as the explicit gift and demand of God's unconditional love. Implicitly, then, they present him as the Liberator of God—the one decisively through whom we are explicitly authorized to exist in and for freedom, which is to say, in faith in God's love and in returning love for God and all whom God loves, and thus for the freedom of all others as ourselves.

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The earliest traditions represent Jesus as the gift and demand of God's love made fully and decisively explicit. His meaning for us, then, is God's unconditional love as the gift and demand of existence in and for freedom.

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