

# Did Jesus change his mind about God? Jesus' conscience viewed phenomenologically

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**Research Project Registration:**

**Project Leader:** Ernest van Eck 

**Project Number:** 2400030

**Description:**

This research is part of the project, 'Hermeneutics and exegesis', directed by Prof. Dr Ernest van Eck, Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria.

**Dates:**

Received: 02 Mar. 2023

Accepted: 17 Apr. 2023

Published: 11 Aug. 2023

**How to cite this article:**

Malan, G.J., 2023, 'Did Jesus change his mind about God? Jesus' conscience viewed phenomenologically', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(1), a8599. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.8599>

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That Jesus changed his mind about God twice is demonstrated by applying Heidegger's idea of conscience to Jesus' decisions for baptism and later for leaving John's group. The common concept of conscience is similar to a judge reflecting on past deeds. Heidegger's phenomenological understanding of conscience is a calling forward towards authentic existence. Inauthentic existence is understood as existence robbed of existential choices as it is dominated by choices made by others. Choosing baptism, Jesus ridded himself of the temple ideology's idea of impurity and purification as well as its image of how God views people. When Jesus left John's group, he discarded John's apocalyptic view of God as imminent end-time judge and the view of God's kingdom in apocalyptic terms. Heidegger's idea of conscience helps us understand Jesus' move to authentic existence and his preaching of the kingdom of God in his terms.

**Contribution:** Research about Jesus and the Baptist has not yet investigated possible changes in Jesus' concept of God regarding Jesus' decisions for baptism, joining and later leaving John's group. Heidegger's concept of conscience was also not yet utilised regarding these changes. This knowledge gap is addressed.

**Keywords:** Historical Jesus; baptism; conscience; phenomenology, Heidegger; authenticity; inauthenticity; John the Baptist.

## Introduction

### The aim of the study

This study intends to apply a phenomenological model derived from Martin Heidegger's understanding of conscience to investigate whether Jesus changed his mind regarding his understanding of God, self and others. The model is specifically applied to Jesus' baptism by John and his later departure from John to start his own brand of ministry.

Research about Jesus and the Baptist did not investigate possible changes in Jesus' concept of God and of God's relationship with people when theorising about Jesus' decisions for baptism, joining and later leaving John's group (see Schweitzer 1911 and Discussion section). A phenomenological idea of conscience calling to authentic *Dasein* was not yet utilised regarding these changes, to investigate the possibility of a development in Jesus' view of God, self and others. This is the knowledge gap to be addressed.

## Methodology: A phenomenological approach

Heidegger's understanding of conscience can be summarised as a calling to authenticity or authentic *Dasein* [being there].

### Dasein

The term *Dasein* reflects on human *being* as having a relationship with oneself rather than merely existing (Kruger 1988:30–31). *Dasein* can formally be defined as being, which is related understandingly in its being towards that being. *Dasein* exists and is the being, which the author always is. 'Mineness' belongs to existing *Dasein* as the condition of the possibility of authenticity and inauthenticity. *Dasein* exists always in one of these modes, namely authentic and inauthentic or else in the indifference to both these modes (Heidegger [1926]1996:49).

*Dasein* is understanding, namely of oneself, others, and one's world. This understanding is ever-developing. New understandings imply fusions of horizons, which mark changes in *Dasein*.

**Note:** Special Collection: Wim Dreyer Dedication, sub-edited by Jaco Beyers (University of Pretoria, South Africa).

Decisions to change may imply answers to conscience calling. *Dasein* is unique ('mineness') and authentic in that it belongs to itself. Inauthentic *Dasein* is based on the conscience of the others. Decisions are either for authentic or inauthentic *Dasein*. *Dasein* is always possibility: it can 'choose' itself in its being. It can win, lose, or never and only 'apparently' win itself (Heidegger [1926]1996:40).

*Dasein* as potential has the possibility of projecting and in understanding what is there; thus, *Dasein* is what it becomes or does not become and can say to itself: 'Become what you are!' (Heidegger [1926]1996:136).'

### Conscience: A phenomenological understanding

If *Dasein* has to understand itself in its possibility for authentic existence (*potentiality-of-being-one's-self*) this attestation must originate from within the being of *Dasein*. The problem is that the who of *Dasein* is mostly the *they-self* and not the *I myself*. Authentic being-a-self requires a modification from this lostness in the *they*. The *they* robs the potentiality-of-being of *Dasein* by deciding already upon tasks, rules, standards, urgency and scope of being-in-the-world and taking care of things. Unobtrusively, the *they* disburdens *Dasein* of the explicit choice of these things as it remains indefinite who is 'really' choosing. In fact, *Dasein* is without choice taken along by the *no one* and gets caught up in inauthenticity. This process can only be reversed if *Dasein*

brings itself back from its lostness in the *they*. *Dasein* needs to realise its neglect of not choosing and thus losing its authenticity. This implies a choice of *Dasein* for its authentic potentiality, but as *Dasein* is lost in the *they*, *Dasein* first needs to find itself. It needs to be shown its possible authenticity, which must be attested by the voice of conscience (Heidegger [1926]1996:246–249).

Conscience shows *Dasein* 'something' to understand, it discloses: it reveals the possibilities of authentic existence by calling *Dasein* to them; it summons *Dasein* to its ownmost quality of being a lack. The call of conscience presupposes a possibility of *Dasein* hearing. Hearing and understanding the call reveals itself as wanting to have a conscience. This contrasts to *Dasein* listening to others and losing itself in the public idle talk of the *they*, thus failing to hear its own self and rather assimilating with the *they self*. Therefore, *Dasein* needs to be brought back from this lostness of failing to hear itself by first finding itself as something that has failed to hear itself. Listening to the *they* must be interrupted by another kind of hearing, of listening to the immediate summons of conscience. The call of conscience arouses this kind of hearing as it calls in every way opposite to the *they* by unambiguously disclosing possible authenticity with the jolt of an abrupt arousal. Not that conscience calls something that is spoken. *Dasein* already understands itself. Conscience's call is always a silent summons. The call says nothing, simply calls *Dasein* to itself, to its ownmost possibilities-of-being-self

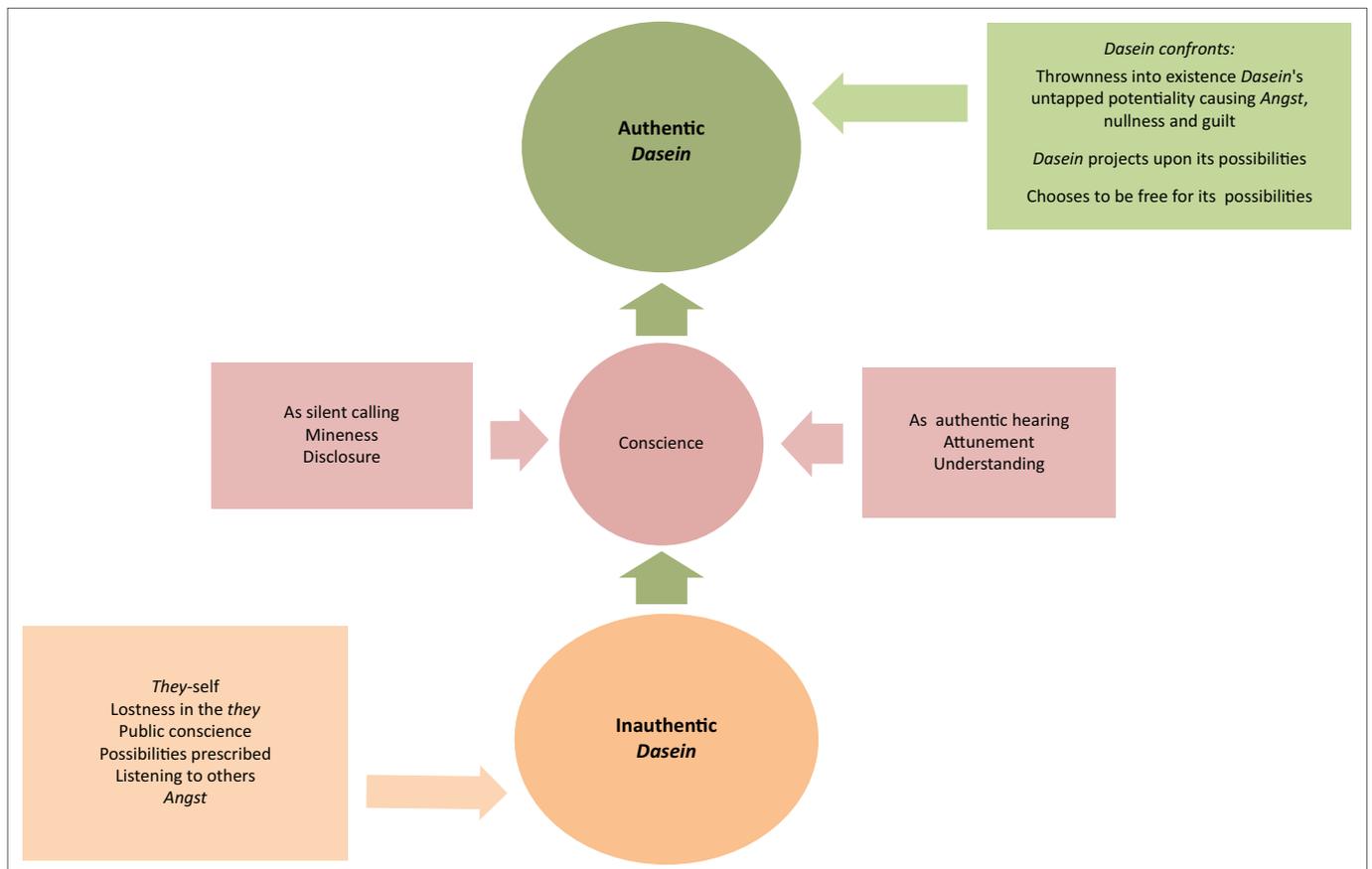


FIGURE 1: Heidegger's concept of conscience.

(see Figure 1). Therefore, although the call is without an utterance, it is not at all obscure and indefinite (Heidegger [1926]1996:250–251). Nevertheless, deceptions can occur within conscience, not by an oversight of the call (a mis-calling), but when the call is not heard authentically. This occurs when the call is drawn by the *they-self* into a manipulative conversation with one's self and its disclosure is distorted. Such a dialogue is possible as the call of conscience also addresses the *they-self* when *Dasein* is called hence forth to its possibilities (Heidegger [1926]1996:253).

Whence does this call originate? Who is calling? The call originates not from someone who is with me. The call comes from me, and yet also over me. Although from me, the call was not planned or wilfully brought about. Against my will and expectations, 'it' calls. It is *Dasein* calling, not as an unattached self-projection, but from its character being determined by thrownness as a fact of its being. Thrownness is not an unimportant quality of *Dasein's* existence, but as thrown, *Dasein* has been thrown into existence and has to be as it is and can be. *Angst* is the most elemental disclosedness of thrown *Dasein*: *Angst* about its potentiality of being within the nothingness of the world about which it is anxious. *Dasein* flees from its thrownness to the alleviation coming from the supposed freedom of the *they-self*. At the same time, the caller is unfamiliar to the *they-self* and is something like an alien voice. It is *Dasein* in its uncanniness, as not-at-home, as naked in the nothingness of the world. It speaks uncannily and silently the message of its potentiality-of-being revealed in *Angst*. Therefore, my *Dasein* itself is the one calling from the ground of its being and at the same time I am the one summoned and uncannily pursued, threatening my self-forgetful lostness:

Conscience reveals itself as the call of care ... The call of conscience, that is, conscience itself, has its ontological possibility in the fact that *Dasein* is care in the ground of its being (Heidegger [1926]1996:254–255).

It follows that the call of conscience is the call of care. *Dasein* as care is concerned about its being and calls to itself as having fallen prey to *the they*. Conscience calls *Dasein* back towards thrownness, to its lostness in *the they* and therefore to being guilty, standing at the null ground of its possibility of being. Authentically hearing the call means *Dasein* takes note of its being guilty. At the same time, it means understanding one's own potentiality-of-being and being called forth towards this possibility. It includes *Dasein* becoming free for the call and understanding the summons and listening to its ownmost possibility of existence and choosing itself. However, it is not a choosing of conscience, which as such cannot be chosen. The choice is for having a conscience as being free for one's ownmost being-guilty. Understanding the call means wanting to have a conscience, not as having a 'good' conscience but as a readiness to be summoned. Conscience discloses the most primordial potentiality-of-being of *Dasein* as being guilty and at the same time calls *Dasein* forth towards its potentiality-of-being (Heidegger [1926]1996:264–266).

## Conscience as commonly understood

Heidegger's view of conscience contrasts with the common sense of conscience, reasoning mostly from the idea of a 'bad conscience' as judgement of a past wrongdoing, thus conferring guilt (see Figure 2). In this instance, the experience of conscience turns up after the deed has been done or left undone, pointing back to the event as a reminder of guilt, not a summons. A 'good' conscience is in effect defined as a lack of a bad conscience, as being innocent of doing a bad deed. Here it comes down to calculating and balancing out guilt and innocence. The warning conscience comes closer to the phenomenon of summoning by pointing ahead. This agreement, however, is an illusion: it is only oriented towards the willed deed, deterring us from it. It is not a positive call towards potentiality of being, but sporadically keeps us free from indebtedness (Heidegger [1926]1996:266–271).

Conscience in the vulgar sense is formed by society and relates to the legitimising function of symbolic universes (Berger & Luckmann 1975). First-century patriarchal Israelite religious society was based on honour and shame as attributed by the community as a matter of public reputation. Accepting this value system means having the proper concern about one's honour and is called positive shame or being sensitive to one's own reputation as well as the opinion of others. A lack thereof is shameless (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:369–372). This is a form of social conscience enticing personal conscience into acceptance. The shameless person therefore has a 'guilty' conscience, and so had others who were labelled as dishonourable. In Israelite society, this value system was endorsed by purity ideology and the temple elite enforcing purification rites to which a minority of males meeting ethnic and ritual purity standards were allowed. The rest of the population was obliged to live as if God did not exist (Van Aarde 2001:131–133). Their impurity and corresponding 'guilty conscience' begged God's remission of sins, which the baptism movement, tried to offer if only for men (Tatum 1994:11–14; 105–167).

The vulgar sense of conscience looms in the background when scholars try to understand Jesus accepting the baptism of redemption. Bousset (Schweitzer 1911)

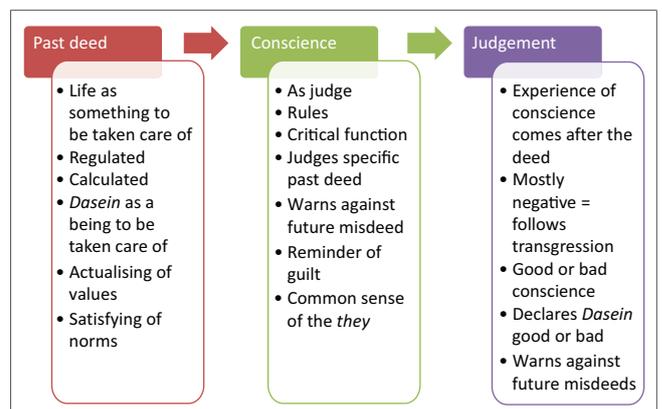


FIGURE 2: The vulgar understanding of consciousness.

suggested the possibility of guilt and sin. Did Jesus transgress, thus needing to repent to receive forgiveness of sins (bad conscience as preached by John (Lk 3:7–9; 16–17; Davies 1995:53–60) Was his baptism the purification from systemic guilt borne by a fatherless Jesus (Van Aarde 2001:47)? Did the apocalyptic conscience of John's society compel him to join, be baptised and thus prepare for the Day of Reckoning (Schweitzer 1911:118, 337–338)? Also extremely pertinent is the question why Jesus disregarded the social conscience based on honour and shame, which upheld the patriarchal society and the system of patronage, and left his obligations to family and home community (regarded as dishonourable and shameless) (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:369–372, 377).

## Application of the model

### Drawing some initial lines

The model can now be applied to Jesus' baptism and departure from John. This will be done after referring to various studies.

Scholars either present both Jesus and John in the same vein: both as apocalyptic Messianic preachers (Schweitzer 1911:16, 81, 238, and 239 – referring to Reimarus, Strauss, Weiss and Schweitzer's own viewpoint; Bultmann [1934]1958:23), or depict John as apocalyptic and Jesus not (Bousset in Schweitzer 1911:244; Holtzmann, Schenkel and Weizsäcker in Schweitzer 1911:205; Crossan 1992:235, Schweizer 1971:22–23; Van Aarde 2001:44). Jesus' departure from John is viewed as Jesus having outgrown his influence (Strauss in Schweitzer 1911:81); Jesus having only gained from John's knowledge of the art of preaching and influencing the masses as John's influence fell away and Jesus became himself once more and returned to his sunny religion (Renan in Schweitzer 1911:184) and even as Jesus censuring John for being unable to believe in an inwardly present kingdom of repentance (Holtzmann, Schenkel and Weizsäcker in Schweitzer 1911:205). There seems to be much uncertainty as to their relationship and estrangement and/or divergence. Let us investigate which aspects were reasonably certain or at least probable.

### Attraction and divergence: Certainties and probabilities

What had compellingly attracted Jesus to John?

To answer this question, the report of the Westar Institute on the historical John the Baptist suggests certainties and probabilities regarding the historical John the Baptist and his interaction with the historical Jesus (Tatum 1994), which will form the framework of the argument, supported by references from other scholars.

There is *reasonable certainty* that John was a historical person, appearing in the wilderness and around the Jordan River preaching baptism as expression of repentance and administering baptism. His ministry had widespread appeal

and was part of a broader baptising movement.<sup>1</sup> John's locale and time overlapped with the historical Jesus. John baptised Jesus and Jesus later identified John as a great figure (Tatum 1994:11–14; 105–167).

We can deduce that the main stimulus for Jesus' decision to be baptised was John's preaching the baptism of repentance. His acceptance of John's baptism confirms an important turning point in Jesus' understanding of God and himself (Malina 2001:145).

It is *reasonably probable* that John was an apocalyptic preacher (Tatum 1994:132) and prophet (Malina 2001:145) (contra Mack).<sup>2</sup> His baptism was an immersion rite performed in flowing water to mediate God's forgiveness and to purify uncleanness. It was an initiation into his sectarian movement (contra Wink 1968:107) and a protest against the temple establishment's exclusive (Van Aarde 2001) and expensive rites of purification (Smith 1973:208). In response, people repented and were baptised. John had disciples. When John baptised Jesus, Jesus had a powerful religious experience<sup>3</sup> and became a disciple of John. Later, Jesus deliberately separated from John and some of John's followers became disciples of Jesus. Jesus' disciples regarded Jesus as John's successor. Jesus contrasted his behaviour with that of John. The movements of John and Jesus were rivals during Jesus' lifetime and after Jesus' death. Apocalypticism was introduced into the Christian tradition after Jesus' death, probably by some of John's initial followers (Tatum 1994: 11–14; 105–167).

As stimuli for Jesus' decision for baptism we can add: it was a purification rite conferring God's forgiveness (Davies 1995:56–57), an initiation into the Baptist's movement and a protest against the temple establishment (Bultmann [1934]1958:24). John's apocalyptic preaching necessitated baptism. These elements can be construed as the essential motivation attracting Jesus to John, confirming Jesus' likemindedness and a shift away from the ideology of the temple state and its understanding of God's relationship to people and affirms his concurring with John's apocalyptic message (Schweizer 1971).

Jesus' baptism and initiation into John's group was not an isolated occurrence. There was a general discontent with the temple establishment. Many people felt separated from God and longed for reconciliation. Like Jesus, many people preferred John's baptism to the temple's daily purification offerings (or were excluded from them). John had other disciples similarly initiated (Wink 1968:107).

1.A group of baptismal sects (e.g. the Essenes) appeared. They were Messianic and eschatological sects for whom baptism had specific significance (Bultmann [1934]1958:23).

2.Burton Mack argues that only at the third redaction of Q was John re-imagined as apocalyptic prophet in order to cast Jesus as true child of wisdom, seer of history past and prophet of history's end, thus also as apocalyptic prophet (Mack 1996:53).

3.It can be described as a conversion or internal transformation (Borg 1994:27), hence Jesus became spirit-filled (Borg 1987:40–41). It can be described as an altered state of consciousness (Pilch 1993) convincing Jesus that God was his father and patron (Malina 2001:145)(Malina, 2001, p. 145).

## Jesus' baptism: Conscience calling

Let us investigate various suggestions from historical studies for clues whether Jesus' understanding of God, self and others developed.

Albert Schweitzer suggests that Jesus and John were both apocalyptic preachers (Schweitzer 1911) while several others do not regard Jesus as an apocalyptic figure (see Discussion section). What possibilities are suggested for understanding Jesus' baptism?

It could be a ceremonial event through which the 'sinful sickness' or impurity of being fatherless was addressed and healed (Van Aarde 2001:47). Also, Jesus must have accepted John's apocalyptic stance (Crossan 1992:260) preparing Jesus and other likeminded people for the future kingdom of God at the catastrophic end of the world (Van Aarde 2001:44).

Judging thus, the vulgar sense of conscience is utilised as social conscience acting as judge on past deeds labelled unacceptable by purity ideology, even of parents causing a child to be labelled impure. The problem using this lens is that it does not explain why Jesus became John's disciple after purification and clearing his conscience. Rather, John's apocalyptic message may be the answer (so Reimarus, Strauss, Weiss, Schweitzer, Bultmann as referenced above). It also leaves unexplained why Jesus left John for his own ministry.

If we use Heidegger's idea of conscience as a lens, Jesus' conscience was calling him to authentic existence. As one of the disenfranchised, (Van Aarde 2001:47, 131–133) he broke away from the prescribed possibilities of the *they* and the *Angst*, nullness and guilt of having to live as if God did not exist. At that time, he was lost to the public conscience, lost in the values by which the *they* regarded and limited him. Regarding his baptism, it explains that Jesus was longing, like many others of his time, to be acceptable for God by being purified. Jesus and other baptised thus willed a mind shift away from the Jerusalem temple's purification rites, as they chose to repent and be purified in an unconventional but legitimate manner (Smith 1973:208). In a sense, they were ridding themselves of the accepted idea of guilt and the normative social conscience of their society. Another kind of conscience pulled them forward, called them towards a new apocalyptically inclined existence not possible before. In short, they were summoned towards a change of mind regarding God and themselves, which they answered. It seems that the vulgar concept of consciousness is insufficient in explaining Jesus' and others' decision for the baptism of repentance as precisely this concept became obsolete for them.

Jesus' joining John's group can also be explained by Heidegger's idea of conscience. The apocalyptically minded existence of a secluded group administering remission of sins might have seemed the ideal existence while awaiting God's imminent judgement. It is plausible for Jesus' conscience

calling him forward to this seemingly authentic existence. It is also probable that when baptised, Jesus had a profound emotional experience, which he may have interpreted as a proof that he had reached authentic existence. Put in other Heideggerian terms: Jesus and John's horizons of understanding God, self and others had fused.

## Growing disillusionment

As time went by, what seemed like authentic existence to Jesus was probably challenged by certain realities, leaving a question mark after the possible meaning of Jesus' emotional experience at baptism. Did it still have any meaning for Jesus? Was it a mere confirmation of the remission of his sins and acceptance by God? Or was it the stimulus for his conscience to call him away from John because there arose more questions than answers about John's ministry? Was John's baptism truly a legitimate and lasting solution to purification? Did it solve the problems of Israel's religious society and its stratification according to the purity ideology declaring certain people unclean sinners? What about sins people committed after baptism? How would sinners again be purified, if God was judging according to Israelite law and they were still excluded from the temple's purification rites? The longer they waited for the Day of Judgement, the greater the problem became. And what if God did not come soon? How long could John's group uphold the apocalyptic message and lifestyle? For how long would it make sense and to whom? What about non-Israelites, women and children? Should patriarchy and patronage remain the structure of society? Is God really guided by retribution in his dealings with people, as John preached?

Questions like these may have brought the realisation that the apocalyptic message and lifestyle had shortcomings and became less and less Jesus' idea of authentic existence so that his conscience called him forward, away from John's ideas and life style.

## Jesus' departure and own ministry as example of his conscience

John and his group over time became another *they-self* from which Jesus' conscience called him forth to his own authentic *Dasein*. The above-mentioned questions must have brought along new *Angst*, nullness and lostness within the prescribed possibilities set by John's apocalyptic group. From this inauthentic existence Jesus' conscience called him forward to form his own understanding of God, self and others, where questions which arose, were problems no more and where authentic existence was possible, a new horizon of *Dasein* as understanding and existing to strive for.

John's apocalypticism, which initially attracted Jesus to John, became the main point of contention, as Jesus own ministry was not apocalyptic (contra Bultmann and Schweitzer) and did not preach a baptism of repentance nor administered a baptism of forgiveness. John and Jesus had different views of God: John awaited God as strict judge demanding utter

obedience, while Jesus understood God as merciful and radicalised God's demands henceforth (Gnilka 1978:51). Jesus eventually came to understand the kingdom of God differently from John although it was a central metaphor to them both. John, as apocalyptic prophet, viewed God's kingdom as the future coming of God's judgement and eternal reign while for Jesus God's kingdom was already fully present (Van Aarde 2001:45). God became the patron to sinners as a heavenly king was to his subjects: one, who reigned with righteousness, compassion, forgiveness and care. Another patronage metaphor was added to the central motif of the kingdom of God, namely of God as father to the faithful, who became God's children. These patronage metaphors were used by Jesus in such a way that God was established as the only patron and the faithful became a community of equals serving God, each other and humanity with love as faithful compassion and care and thus established the basic norm of ethics for his followers. This newness of life became the essence of their salvation (Malan 2020). In this sense, Jesus not only distanced himself from John and apocalypticism but also from the temple establishment and their concept of sin and purification. Jesus' conscience called him to this new understanding of himself and others in their relationship to God and each other.

Unfortunately, apocalypticism was later introduced into Christianity (probably by some of John's followers) (Tatum 1994:11–14; 105–167) and in time alienated the Christian faith from Jesus' understanding, of conscience as calling and his sense of authentic *Dasein*. These concepts were replaced with the vulgar sense of conscience as a judge of past transgressions to be repented for and forgiven to escape God's wrath and eternal damnation. Should not Christianity move away from the vulgar sense of conscience as well as apocalyptic concepts to a sense of conscience calling them to authentic *Dasein* as invited by the patronage metaphors above and the relationships generated by them?

## Conclusion

Jesus seems to have changed his mind about God at least twice: when he decided to be baptised by John, Jesus accepted John's idea of God's judgement as imminent, which necessitated disregarding the exclusivity of the temple elite's performance of purification rites. When Jesus left John, his understanding of God, self and others had changed radically. He regarded God as compassionate patron for all. Jesus viewed himself broker of this relationship, calling it the kingdom of God or household of God: compassionate equals serving God as patron. Jesus came to understand God as already fully present in the here and now (Van Aarde 2001:113). This viewpoint became the essence of Jesus' self-understanding as child of God and therefore a precondition for authentic *Dasein*, to which his conscience has called him and every one he ministered to.

Jesus therefore shaped his own understanding of God: not acting as judge who rules according to Israelite law distributing retribution, but God as compassionate patron to all. God was not viewed as exclusively focussed on Israel, but in an inclusive way: God was available to anyone, regardless of perceived degrees of purity, ethnicity, gender, age or standing.

The contribution of this research is that it reveals a development of certain facets in Jesus' understanding of God, self and others.

It can be argued from the results presented that Jesus decisions for baptism and departure from John's group represents a shift from an initial to a revised understanding of authentic *Dasein*, thus revealing a development present in Jesus' understanding of God, self and others. The model based on Martin Heidegger's understanding of consciousness is shown to be effective in this regard.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

### Author's contributions

G.J.M., is the sole author of this research article.

### Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

### Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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