

How Jesus gradually accepted an identity of the suffering Messiah point of view of psychology

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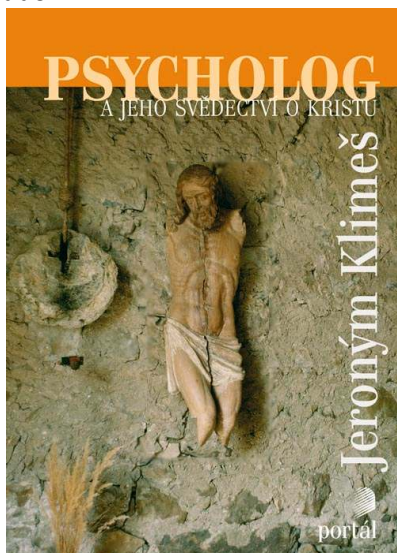
Summary

Simply said, an identity is endless rehearsals of unfinished sentences: I am... I have... I can... and their negations. There are well know old sayings: “Who are you, where do you come from, where are you going? Build a house, plant a tree, bear a son!” An identity has many layers, which gradually actualize as we are growing older. Also with Jesus, we see that some identities come already in his childhood and others come with years. One of the late identity he accepted was a picture of the suffering servant from Deuteroisaiah (Is 52,13-53,12).

The acceptance of a new identity is never an instant, one-shot event. It is always a process which runs in waves and phases. These are even more intensive when it is to be a painful identity, which is the case. E. Kübler Ross described these phases, but they are rather different when a situation (as in the case of Jesus) deteriorates step by step and cannot be stopped. The anticipated painful end is getting more and more clear. There appears a phase of aggression just before the end, strictly speaking a phase of unspecific defenses – expelling the money changers from the temple, cursing the fig tree, the instruction to take swords for defense. There comes depression after this phase. When human overcomes it, we see a new person who fully accepts his new identity. Both these last phases are recorded in the Gospels. The depressive phase reflects the sentence from the garden in Getsemane: “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: abide ye here, and watch with me.” But after the prayer in Getsemane, a decisive man with a new, fully accepted identity stands in front of us: „Rise, let us be going“

The phase process of changing the identity, we know from psychology, might help us to understand and structure the events in the Gospels and to see Jesus as a real man, who developed and matured in the very same way as we do.

These ideas are taken from a new book by the author: Klimeš Jeroným: Psychologist and his testimony of Christ. Portál, Prague, 2008



What is identity

We can say (a little bit simplifying) that an identity is an endless rehearsal of unfinished sentences: *I am... I have... I can...* or their negations. Everybody knows old sayings related to identity: *Who are you, where do you come from, where are you going?* or *Build a house, plant a tree, bear a son!*

An identity has many layers, which are gradually actualized as we grow older. The most important developmental age for building an identity is adolescence, that is why we see so many adolescent conversions at this age. Also with Jesus, we see that some identities came already in his childhood and others came later with years. The following table summarizes the most important and striking identity layers of Jesus, as he was quite inventive in finding his identity.

Table 1:

Identity layer	Estimated age
Identity of an adopted child	Circa 4 years (an analogy with contemporary children in foster care)
Identity of Son of God versus illegitimate child	Seen in 12 years – in the Temple; the temptation in the desert: “If you are the Son of God...”
Identity of Son of man – apocalyptic thinking	Roughly between puberty and adulthood. This role came later than the Son of God.
Identity of the living bread of the world	Between feeding 4000 people and the last supper (John 6 th chapter)
Identity of the suffering Messiah	Around the revelation at the Mountain Tabor. Last struggle during the prayer in Getsemane.

Succession of identity layers in Jesus

Jesus accepted the identity of the suffering servant from Deuterioisaiah quite late (Is 52,13-53,12). His identity was build in periods, in a similar way as our identity. Say, with a single person, an identity to be a father must come logically after the identity to be a son.

Identity of an adopted child

All Christian churches believe that St. Joseph was not Jesus' biological father. It means Jesus must have had a mind that we usually see in adopted children. Adopting parents often do not tell these children that they are adopted. The truth is often said in some conflicting situation. Let's imagine there was a contest of a kind among children, when Jesus is let us say just 4 years old.

Jesus: We are the winners! Our father won, and yours not. We are the champions, my friend!

Fellow, older boy: Shut up, Joshua! Joseph is not your father. You are a bastard!

Jesus: No! This cannot be true! You are a liar! Joseph is my father!!!

Fellow: No, he is not...

...

Jesus to his mother: Mom, tell them Joseph is my father, that I am not a bastard!

Maria: Well, how to say that...

It is very probable, that an argument among ancient children would follow this or a very similar pattern we know from contemporary children. Jesus finds out at this age that he simply cannot be a child of Joseph. The environment prevents him from finding an identity of a biological child of Joseph. His life path was getting to be much more entangled at that moment.

So if we have a possibility to ask historical Jesus a question: „Whose son do think you are?“ It is highly probable, that we would get an answer: „My biological father is God who is in heaven.“ (Of course this is said in modern terminology, as the word “biology” is much younger.)

Searching a new identity is a source of endless doubts

Building a new identity is a very demanding task. We can see many signs of this mental strain in the Gospels. For instance the desert temptations. The Devil aims at Jesus’ weakest point – his identity: „If you are a son of God, then...“ What is the feared unspoken alternative at this background? „If you are not a son of God, then you are just a plain bastard.“

Whose son the Messiah is to be?

Another example of Jesus’ self doubts is the debate with Pharisees on a question: „Whose son the Messiah is to be?“ It is very strange, as if he were of David succession, he would not doubt and unfix the commonly shared opinion that Messiah is to be of David succession. But his identity is different. He thought he was the Son of God, and therefore he cannot be a son of David. That is why he dares to challenge common beliefs:

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, What think ye of the Christ? Whose son is he?

They say unto him, [The son] of David.

He saith unto them, How then doth David in the Spirit call him Lord, saying, The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, Till I put thine enemies underneath thy feet? (Ps 110, 1) If David then calleth him Lord, how is he his son?

And no one was able to answer him a word, neither durst any man from that day forth ask him any more questions. Mat 22, 41-46

I am the bread of life

This is one of the latest layers of Jesus’ identity. He invented this identity of a living bread in a struggle: How to explain his ideas to simple minded audience. So we are lucky to follow this theory of Eucharist from its very origin – from the first idea that occurred to Jesus: “Do not look for earthly bread, look for me. I am also a bread, well a bit heavenly.”

They said therefore unto him, Lord, evermore give us this bread.

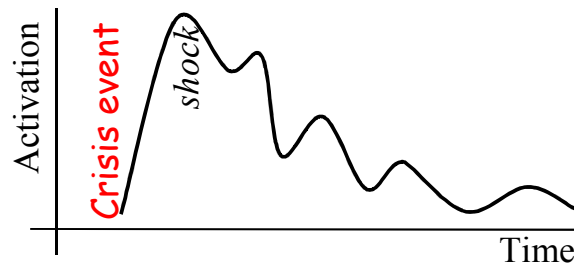
Jesus said unto them. I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall not hunger, and he that believeth on me shall never thirst. Joh 6, 35

A death of a significant other - phases of mourning

The acceptances of a new identity is never an instant, one-shot event. It is always a process which runs in waves and phases. When we lose or are just going to lose something valuable, we go through a phases of changing and finally accepting a new identity. There are at least two types of these phases.

Five stages of accepting a new identity

E. Kübler Ross describes changing identity with a shocking event at the beginning in her book On Death and Dying. These phases are typical with a crisis event and a consequent shock at the beginning.

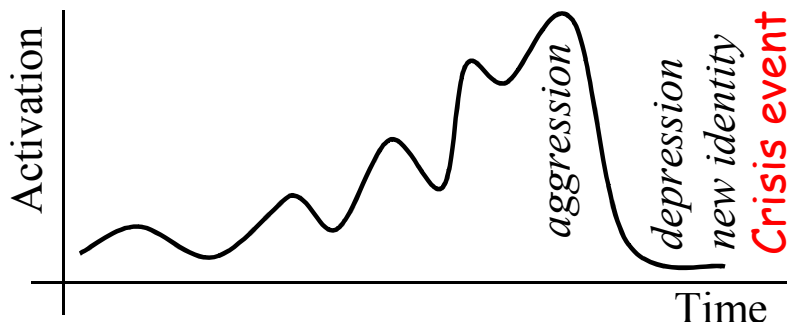


I. Five stages of a changing identity with a crisis at the beginning

- 0) Sudden, instant strike
- 1) **Shock phases**, e.g. denial
- 2) **Unspecific defensive reactions**, e.g. aimless aggression, or other spontaneous relieving maneuver
- 3) **Specific defensive reactions** and efforts aimed at managing the problem, e.g. bargaining with God; searching professional help, protection, bribery, etc.
- 4) **Reactive depression** as a result of chronic failure and helplessness
- 5) **Accepting of a new identity**, e.g. reconciliation with reality, illness...

II. Five stages with slow deterioration

But the previous, well-known phases are a bit different, when a normal situation deteriorates step by step and the foreseen crisis event comes at the end. Then the shock phase is missing at all, as there is no surprise moment. This type of phases is typical for breakups; gradual losing of sight; foster parents who are unable to manage an adopted child and consider to return him to a children's home, etc. This type of stages is also the case of Jesus.



Five stages of changing identity with foreseen crisis at the end

- 0) Slowly degrading situation, approaching foreseen crisis
- 1) **Trying personal common, time-proven relieving maneuvers with extreme intensity**
- 2) **Looking for new solutions, specific defensive reactions**
- 3) **Unspecific defensive reactions**, e.g. aimless aggression
- 4) **Reactive depression** as result of chronic failure and helplessness
- 5) Accepting of a new identity, e.g. reconciliation with reality
- 6) Crisis event, which of course might come earlier - before finishing identity transformation.

Jesus' stages of this second type

We see all these phases in Jesus with previously seen succession:

- 1. Trying time-proven relieving maneuvers with extreme intensity**
Intensified discussions with Pharisees; miracles as an argument in discussions
- 2. Searching after new solutions, specific defensive reaction**
Various miraculous experiments after the death of John Baptist – feeding 4000 people; walking on water; resurrection of Lazarus; consultation with Moses and Elias on the mountain Tabor
- 3. Unspecific defensive reactions, e.g. aimless aggression**
Aggression phase – cursing fig tree; expelling money changers from the temple; instruction to take swords for defense; dreams about violent defense
- 4. Reactive depression from chronic failure and helplessness**

Depression before the prayer in Getsemane garden: “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: abide ye here, and watch with me.”

5. Accepting of a new identity

The result of the prayer in Getsemane. A decisive man with a new, fully accepted identity stands in front of us: „Arise, let us be going“

Prayer in Getsemane

We see Jesus in the third phase (depression) at the beginning: “*My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: abide ye here, and watch with me.*” Mat 26, 38

His relieving maneuver was to pray. The prayer in his case had theocentric framework: Looking for God’s goals first and his own needs are secondary:

And he went forward a little, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt. Mat 26, 39

God’s feedback came only as a sight at sleeping disciples. Jesus understood – he must go through “via crucis” as it was the the only way how to truly wake up the disciples:

And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them sleeping, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. Mat 26, 40-41

Changing rhetoric suggests a changing identity in general. Jesus’ rhetoric change was as follows:



Again a second time he went away, and prayed, saying, My Father, if this cannot pass away, except I drink it, thy will be done.

And he came again and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. And he left them again, and went away, and prayed a third time, saying again the same words. Mat 26, 42

After this personal struggle, we see a new brave person with fully accepted new identity:

Then cometh he to the disciples, and saith unto them, Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.

Let’s sum up the signs of new identity

1. Changed rhetoric
2. Suddenly no signs of depression
3. No signs of fear
4. Asking disciples for support is suddenly absent
5. Asking God for changing his plans is absent
6. Giving up all fantasies about defense with swords and violence

Jesus on the cross – Identity rehearsal

Movie *United 93* shows us the last moments of a hijacked plane on September 11th. The hijackers' final prayers ("Allahu akbar") is put in contrast to the passengers’ "Our Father, who art in heaven" The prayer comes at the end of the flight, as people who face processes out of their control, are used to turn themselves to someone who (they think) has the situation under control – a parent, a boss, a god...



Facing processes out of human’s control, she or he is used to look for help from heaven

People in extreme situations tend to rehearse well-known memorized texts or sing songs which seem to hit the meaning of the present moment, their actual mental setting. This rehearsal has a soothing

effect – to reduce over-stimulation. It calms down the organism and its natural defensive reaction, as organism is predisposed to increase its activation promptly and also often too much.

Jesus also rehearsed psalms he knew by heart. Namely 22nd psalm – My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Mar 15, 34

The second one was the 31st psalm: „Into thine hand I commit my spirit: thou hast redeemed me, O Lord God of truth.“

And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost. Luk 23,46 (Gnilka, 2001)

This rehearsal is not an abandoning his identity in the heaviest period of his life but on the contrary its conservation, as both psalms are about the victory of a suffering Messiah.

Conclusion

Jesus' identity was something that enabled him to complete his mission. It was very difficult for him to find himself, because of unusual conception, of being an adopted child, etc.

It is traditionally common in theology to overestimate literal sciences. Psychological laws can also shed some light into our strife to understand the historical Jesus. Namely the phase processes structure time in firm succession, which is predictable. No phase can be skipped and the order is also the same with everybody. Therefore known psychological phenomena can serve a useful instrument for time “stratigraphy” of Jesus' life.