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Preaching a mountain

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**English
podcast transcript**

Preaching a mountain

Jesus the Wise as a guest with sinners

English transcript

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FM: Jesus of Nazareth is the role model of Christianity. The New Testament is his communiqué, the good news, and the reference point of his wisdom. But not only the canonical texts of the New Testament give us a picture of what makes Jesus a wise teacher. In the Gospel of Thomas – a so-called apocryphal text, that is, not included in the Bible – we find words of Jesus that, although unknown to many, can be understood as a source of wisdom. But if we understand Jesus Christ as a sage; what kind of wisdom does he convey? A divine wisdom or a profane one? Fortunately, we have Konrad Schwarz as our guest today who will help us to better understand Jesus as a sage and thus, of course, the Gospels. Konrad Schwarz is a research associate at the Chair of New Testament Text and Interpretation History at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Hello Mr. Schwarz. It's good to have you here.

KS: Hello.

FM: Jesus is the founder of Christianity, but he himself was a Jew. It can be assumed that he knew the wisdom teachings of Judaism well. Can you briefly describe what was characteristic of these teachings at that time and perhaps explain to what extent Jesus sustained them or tried to distinguish himself from them?

KS: Yes, I would like to begin by saying a few words about wisdom in ancient Judaism. I can highly recommend the METIS podcast on the topic where Andreas Kilcher presents this in a wonderful way. And that's why I can now limit myself to a few general characteristics: briefly, one can say that Jewish wisdom is a wisdom that understands itself as a kind of life science, aiming at a successful life. Key topics are the observation of nature and society. This wisdom is based on the conviction that God has created the world with a just order. And in Jewish wisdom, an important basic concept is the fear of God, which can be described as piety. This guidance to a successful life, which wisdom wants to give, then has a strong focus on ethics. Let us now come to Jesus. Generally, one can say that Jesus builds on various Jewish wisdom that he often uses as arguments. What is new is that Jesus connects the wisdom teachings of Judaism with the message of the dawning Kingdom of God. To give a brief example: Jesus calls for not worrying about the mundane – the horizon, as I mentioned, is the dawning reign of God – and he refers in that context to the birds in the air, saying that they do not sow and they do not reap, and yet they are fed by God. And he then asks: are you not much more precious than them? So he addresses and includes his audience.

FM: Are we talking about a very broad understanding of the concept of wisdom here? I wonder if Jesus himself explicitly call what he says 'wisdom'? Does he use that term?

KS: First of all, it is quite interesting to look at the places in the Jesus tradition where wisdom is mentioned. There are not so many passages, but they are very revealing. In one passage, Jesus refers to the wise, Jewish, Israelite King Solomon, who was visited by the Queen of Sheba, who traveled from afar – so it says in the Hebrew Bible – to marvel at Solomon's wisdom and inquire about it. And Jesus then says: "And, behold, a greater than Solomon is here." Jesus claims that his words and actions surpass the wisdom of Solomon at the time. Another interesting passage is when Jesus addresses God and praises God for having hidden wisdom from the wise of the world, and having revealed it to the uneducated instead. That is, it is precisely those who are not trusted with knowledge who receive wisdom imparted through Jesus. And in the third passage – as I said, there are only a few passages and therefore it is good to look at them individually – Jesus deals with the people in his environment, who tend to reject him. These are called 'this generation' in the Jesus

tradition, depending on the translation. And there he deals with how they react to what Jesus does, and what John the Baptist did. Jesus says that John the Baptist cultivated a very ascetic lifestyle; he did not eat and did not drink and so on, and was therefore reviled by those around him as one who was possessed by demons. Jesus, on the other hand, often has communal meals, and visits the homes of those who are condemned as tax collectors and sinners. Jesus retorts: And yet wisdom has been justified by all her children. That means those who recognize wisdom, they really see; this is the true wisdom. So here we have a very critical examination of the concept of wisdom.

FM: Yes, it seems very sociocritical, as Jesus turns certain hierarchies upside down.

KS: Yes, well, to a certain extent you can detect an anti-elitist trait, where you clearly see that Jesus prefers the company of the marginalized and excluded groups. And he thereby also claims authority, saying that it is not his goal to convince the wise of the world, who consider themselves wise, but he wants to impart wisdom to those – one can conclude – who are receptive to it.

FM: And what tools does Jesus use to convey wisdom? Did he connect to certain contents, forms or genres of wisdom expressions that existed before him? Or should he be seen more as an innovator?

KS: In this context, one can consider above all the Sermon on the Mount, where Matthew collected and compiled many of Jesus' wise statements. Hence, the Sermon on the Mount is a good starting point to get a feeling for what the topic of wisdom or wisdom traditions means for Jesus. And I think you can extract some good examples to get an idea of the various wisdom-related content: One area is observations of nature, which is strong in Jewish wisdom and tradition. I mentioned earlier that Jesus refers to the birds that do not sow and do not reap, and yet are provided for by God. A similar example: the lilies of the field that do not work and do not spin, yet God clothes. And Jesus then asks the question: should he not rather do this for you, ye of little faith? Another theme we see there is human society, where observations or regularities in human society are also taken as a starting point and certain things are illustrated by them. Jesus asks the question: Can the blind lead

the blind? Will they not both fall into a pit? And he draws from this the conclusion: The disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher. Certain observations are extracted and used as illustrations. All in all, it is easy to see that Jesus did not convey wisdom sayings as an end in itself. The wise sayings always stand in concrete argumentation contexts. An example is again this rhetorical conclusion from the lesser to the greater, i.e. according to the pattern: if this and this is valid, then even more so this and this. This is apparent in the aforementioned examples of the birds and the lilies. On the other hand, there are ethical maxims, such as the so-called 'golden rule', which has parallels in many wise traditions of the world, including the Hebrew Bible. According to the Sermon on the Mount, the 'golden rule' is: In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you. So you have this reciprocity principle as orientation, where you think about what the other person might expect and want from you. Wisdom tradition can also be found in the parables. They are often based on certain everyday observations or regularities in nature. One example is at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus says that whoever hears his words and obeys them is like someone who built his house on a rock. And who hears these words, but does not obey, is like someone who has built his house on sand – this is a common proverb to this day – this house then collapses when the storm comes. Inspired by nature, there are, for example, the parables of the mustard seed and of the sourdough that start out small and unseen: the little bit of sourdough that is kneaded into a large amount of flour and then rises; the small and humble mustard seed, that is later grandly described as a tree. Hence, imagery from the realms of nature and from everyday human life is taken up and continued there in a concrete way.

FM: You have emphasized the continuities of the Jewish wisdom. Jesus was a Jew and so were many of his followers. He was also sometimes addressed by his followers as a rabbi. Perhaps you could briefly explain why? Did Jesus want to distinguish himself from Judaism or did he seek continuity?

KS: I'll start the last question: did Jesus want to distance himself from Judaism? The sources do not indicate that this was in any way the case. At the same time, we must keep in mind: In that period, Judaism was very diverse. There were different groups and currents with often different expectations. Some assumed the resurrection of the dead, such as the

Pharisees. Others categorically rejected it, such as the Sadducees. And similarly, it is questionable which writings, which traditions are considered authoritative. We see, for example, in the ancient traditions that the Sadducees refer exclusively to the five books of Moses – the Pentateuch, the Torah – while the Pharisees also accept the teachings of the prophets or the oral traditions. Now to the question of why Jesus was actually addressed as rabbi. This is a very interesting question, which cannot be answered so easily. The sources quite naturally assume that Jesus was addressed as a rabbi. Occasionally they use the Aramaic word rabbi, but often they use the Greek form *didáskalos*, which means teacher or master. And in the different Gospels there are different interpretations and images that try to clarify what is actually meant by Jesus being a teacher. Two examples of this: The Gospel of Mark uses Jesus' teaching in the context of his ministry in the synagogue. Here, Jesus teaches with authority – unlike the scribes. So there is a very clear differentiation in this account from other scholars of the time. Teaching with authority means that Jesus heals sick people and casts out demons. And overall, in Mark's Gospel, Jesus' teaching is often used interchangeably with speaking or preaching. There, the entire appearance of Jesus can be portrayed in parts as a teaching. We see another picture in the Gospel of Matthew, where the teaching of Jesus is very strongly connected with ethics. We see this especially in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus first interprets the Torah – that is, the five books of Moses – often in a rather radical way. He questions the intention of the commandments and goes beyond what one should or should not do, suggesting that if one already considers doing this and that, then one has already transgressed the commandments. And on the other hand, we have general instructions on ethical behavior, such as in the 'golden rule', which I had already mentioned. One can assume that Matthew is closer to the Jewish tradition and also to the time of Jesus, as he sharpens the image of Jesus as a teacher, especially on ethics, where Mark's Gospel draws a more general picture.

FM: You've just mentioned the Gospels that tell the story of Jesus – a quasi-mediating authority between us and Jesus – we'll talk about that later. First, I would be interested to know how this is in today's Judaism. Is Jesus understood as a sage there as well? Is, or was he seen as a figure who embodies the wisdom of the Hebrew Bible?

KS: In the research of recent years, Jesus was increasingly drawn into the Jewish context of his time, and attempts were made to understand Jesus against the Jewish context of ancient Judaism, above all, in Judea and Galilee at that time. Today, the Jewish and Christian research agree on this in principle. In the last decades many Jewish researchers have dealt with Jesus. And Jewish wisdom is often a topic, an area in which the continuity between Jesus and Judaism becomes vividly apparent. For the most part, however, Jesus is not presented as a sage; rather, these discussions focus on how Jesus interprets the Torah and, more importantly, how to determine the relationship between Jesus' preaching and the development of doctrine in early Christianity. Jesus is, however, decidedly understood as a Jewish sage in an American research group called 'Jesus Seminar'. Here, Jesus is increasingly seen as an itinerant preacher and sage who confronted the dogmas of the Judaism of his time and turned to social fringe groups. However, one can question their research interests and if certain emphases are set in a problematic way. Specifically in the way that the apocalyptic expectation, the reference to the dawning of the Kingdom of God, increasingly recedes into the background. And this is certainly an area with which we have more problems today than with a Jesus who reaches out to social fringe groups and stands out as a wise, ethical teacher.

FM: We have now examined the relationship between Christianity and Judaism in particular. I would find it exciting to establish other, transcultural references. For example, Jesus was surrounded by disciples. What is this community like? Is it perhaps comparable with the followers of Socrates, for example?

KS: Yes, but I would like comment on the terminology first. We speak of disciples. But in Greek, you don't actually distinguish between students and disciples. One could just as well speak of the students of Jesus. To answer your question regarding analogies to the circle of Jesus' disciples: First of all, it is important to note that the closest analogies are again in the Jewish tradition. On the one hand with the prophets of Israel. In the narrations of the Book of Kings there is Elijah, who appoints Elisha as his successor. This is presented quite vividly: Elijah meets Elisha while working in the fields. He throws his cloak on Elisha and invites him to follow him. Perhaps in a comparable way, at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, it says that Jesus meets his first disciples at the Sea of Galilee. They are fishermen going about their

work. And he says: I will make you fishers of men. We are clearly dealing with literary anecdotes, but it is apparent in what way the beginnings of the circle of Jesus' disciples were remembered. And secondly – also in the Jewish tradition – we hear several times that John the Baptist had disciples. Jesus held John in high esteem, and he may have been in communication with John's disciples. This can only be seen in outline, however, because the early Christian sources are preoccupied with explaining the relationship between Jesus and John. The Gospel begins with John, according to the beginning of Mark's Gospel, where John says: Jesus is the stronger one who comes after me. It is difficult to say what John's circle of disciples might have looked like, since there is little information about this outside the Gospels. It's interesting to take a closer look at what Jesus' disciples' undertakings are: They proclaim the dawn of the Kingdom of God and heal and cast out demons. Clearly, Jesus delegates part of his task to his circle of disciples. It is also interesting that there is another, larger circle of disciples. The Gospel of Luke, for example, speaks of 72 who are commissioned to heal, to proclaim the Kingdom of God, and to cast out demons. And within this circle, you can also find some women following Jesus, which is definitely very unusual at that time. Within this wider circle there is a kind of leadership staff: the 12 disciples. It is important to note that the number 12 is symbolic and probably means that Jesus directs his work to all the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The spokesman of this inner circle is obviously Peter. Now to come back to Socrates: The dialogue, *Phaedo*, outlines the day of Socrates' death. The dialogue is broadly developed and focuses above all on the soul and its immortality, and therefore one can say that *Phaedo* is a kind of philosophical consolation in the face of death. The framework of the dialogue, however, seems to preserve historical memories. Plato dies in the circle of his followers; one could also say in the circle of his friends. He expressly sends his wife and children away because they spread too much of a mourning mood; they cry and grieve. Yet Socrates wants to approach his death calmly and composedly. A certain analogy can perhaps be found in Jesus' 'Last Supper' with his disciples. Especially in the Gospel of John, the 'Last Supper' is broadly elaborated and there is reference to the theme of friendship. There, Jesus calls his disciples his friends and Jesus interprets his imminent death as a commitment to his friends. He gives his life for the friends. A striking difference, however, is that in the hour of death, where Jesus is crucified, the disciples leave Jesus, probably because they themselves were afraid of arrest. Jesus dies the ignominious death of a criminal and political agitator. And there again it is women, of all people, who watch at

some distance and do not run away. Among them is Mary Magdalene. According to the Gospels, it is the women who later find the empty tomb and are told by an angel that Jesus is no longer there, but has risen. They are to go tell Peter and the disciples that Jesus will appear to them in Galilee.

FM: Jesus, like Socrates, is a teacher who had disciples around him but did not produce any writings himself. The wisdom of the teacher or master is witnessed and transmitted by his disciples. Is this a typical case of wisdom teaching? And wouldn't it be more convenient to put down in writing what one has to say, rather than relying on other messengers?

KS: I believe that is very different in detail. In Socrates' case, the reason is probably that he prefers a lively dialogue. Socrates, after all, became famous precisely for his maieutic method: Like a midwife, the philosopher guides the interlocutor to knowledge; in contrast to monologue-like teaching. Plato then writes dialogues to illustrate this. However, Plato also emphasizes in his writings that the written word of the philosopher is more of a gimmick or a kind of memory aid. Plato agrees that the oral conversation is the ideal. With Jesus the reasons are probably similar in parts. The circle of disciples is assigned, as mentioned, some of Jesus' tasks – to announce the dawn of the Kingdom of God and so on – the harbinger is of course different with Jesus, where the focus is on the fact that the end is near, that the kingdom of God has begun and will soon be brought to an end. We are dealing with a form of Jewish apocalyptic, where the question of how the words of Jesus will be relayed is less of an issue, especially in the Gospels. And only in the later Apocryphal Gospels, which did not become part of the Bible, do we read in some places that the disciples wrote down the words of Jesus.

FM: Let's talk about these written testimonies of the story of Jesus. These are the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Perhaps you could remind us: What do these four texts include? What do they teach us?

KS: Yes, maybe I'll start with the Gospel of John, which is definitely very divergent. At the beginning, there is a hymn about the word *logos*, which was with God in the beginning, then came into the world and became flesh. From there, the story of Jesus unfolds. Jesus is

portrayed as often giving long speeches, where he describes who he is and in which relationship he stands to God. In the other three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, we see very strong similarities. They have a similar structure: In the beginning, Jesus is baptized by John. He begins to proclaim the Kingdom of God. He heals and casts out demons. The climax is the events in Jerusalem. Jesus discusses various factual issues with the Jewish authorities. It is portrayed that the Jewish authorities want to trap him again and again. Essentially, it is a very factual argumentation. Finally, Jesus is arrested by the Roman authorities. There is a trial, which is described in detail, and Jesus is executed on the cross. The language and individual episodes in the first three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, are very similar. Therefore, in research they are called the synoptic gospels.

FM: Is there anything that unites the synoptic gospels from a wisdom point of view? Or do they entail strongly divergent views and teachings?

KS: In general, they are more similar than not. We often find short aphorisms and parables in what Jesus tells. But there are also differences. Mark tends to prefer an anecdotal style, similar to Luke. There, striking statements of Jesus are often embedded in a short scene. In the antique literature this is known as a chreia; a certain cause for a certain word is described and at the end there is often a very short saying, sometimes also a short action. Chreiai were also very popular in the biographies of antiquity. For example, in his work: *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, Diogenes Laertius wrote many chreiai, for example about the philosopher Diogenes of Sinope, also known as Diogenes the Cynic, who once saw a child drawing water from a well with his hand. Whereupon Diogenes threw away his cup and remarked, "A child has beaten me in plainness of living." Let me give you a vivid example of a chreia that simply embeds a certain word, a certain saying, from the Gospel of Mark: Jesus says: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." So he addresses his message to those who need it and who are open to it, and not to those who are not at all amenable to it. In Matthew, again, the interesting thing is that he takes a great deal of wisdom material and compiles it into longer speeches. His most famous speech, to which I had already referred, is the Sermon on the Mount. But the material probably comes to a large extent from a source that has not been preserved, the so-called 'Common Sayings Source'.

FM: How did the Gospels emerge from this 'Common Sayings Source'?

KS: In research, there is a larger discussion about this. I will limit my answer to the quasi standard model. It is assumed that the Gospel of Mark is the oldest Gospel, which was written in about the year 70, and that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke used the Gospel of Mark as a source; they revised and expanded it, but basically followed its structure. Now, it is interesting that Matthew and Luke probably had another available source, the so-called 'Common Sayings Source'. This is one that has not been preserved but can be reconstructed in outline from the similarities of Matthew and Luke. And this source obviously had a greater interest in wisdom traditions of Jesus. Much of what I have already mentioned in terms of examples from the Sermon on the Mount, as well as Jesus' prominent statements about wisdom, probably come from the sayings. As far as we can reconstruct, the 'Common Sayings Source' belongs to a current of early Christianity that had a strong interest in wisdom traditions. At the same time, however, we also find narrative sections in this 'Common Sayings Source', although it is called a source of *sayings*. For example, it describes the encounter between Jesus and John the Baptist. Jesus is also very much portrayed in the prophetic tradition, in the tradition of the prophets of Israel. So you can't say that Jesus was originally considered wise and only later was portrayed in a less wise way.

FM: In the introduction I had already mentioned the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. You have done a lot of research on it yourself and you have already mentioned that it contains very wise elements. Why is it not in the Bible today?

KS: There are various possible answers. I'll try to summarize three. First of all, at its beginning, the Gospel of Thomas presents itself as the hidden words of Jesus. It says in the introduction: "These are the hidden words that the living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas wrote them down." So here, we have this little scene of Jesus talking to Thomas and Thomas writing it all down as a result. Essentially, this notion of 'hidden words' can be understood in two different ways. On the one hand, it can mean that the value of these words is hidden and must first be recognized. It is also said afterwards that whoever finds the interpretation of these words will not taste death. At the beginning of this scripture, it is

very strongly emphasized that it is a matter of working out for oneself an understanding of the words of Jesus as they are handed down in the Gospel of Thomas. On the other hand, of course, hidden words – or one could translate it as secret words – can mean that they are not publicly available. From this point of view, the Gospel of Thomas would not even have the claim to become canonical. The second aspect that can be considered is the question of the time of origin. The time of origin of the Gospel of Thomas can only be determined approximately. Probably it was written in the middle to the end of the second century. It can be assumed that the 'Four Gospel Canon' had already been established to a large extent at that time. From this point of view, the Gospel of Thomas simply came too late. The third aspect that plays an important role is the theology of the Gospel of Thomas. The question of how it fits in with the developing church doctrine of the time, and also with the theological commonalities of the writings that made it into the New Testament. In any case, one can say that the Gospel of Thomas goes its own way. The Gospel of Thomas emphasizes the importance of gaining knowledge and finding the interpretation of the words of Jesus oneself. In contrast, at one point Jesus' disciples ask who he is: "Tell us who you are so that we may believe in you." Jesus rejects them curtly. There you can see that faith in the view of the Gospel of Thomas is not a legitimate attitude towards Jesus at all. Therefore, one can say that this is difficult to reconcile in terms of content with the writings that have become part of the New Testament canon.

FM: May I ask you to briefly explain what the relationship between the Gospel of Thomas and the canonical texts are, especially regarding wisdom?

KS: One could say that the Gospel of Thomas takes up a great deal of wisdom material from various texts of the New Testament, that is, the Gospels – especially the Sermon on the Mount – but also from other parts. At the same time, the Gospel of Thomas has a very strong imprint of its own. The words of Jesus are not put into larger speeches like the Sermon on the Mount, nor are they put into actions and small story episodes. They often stand alone and are introduced with the phrase "Jesus said". The shortest word in the Gospel of Thomas is: "Jesus said: Become passers-by." It is up to the reader to find out what this means and to draw a conclusion for themselves.

FM: But to what extent is it understood as Christian wisdom teaching? Or to what extent was it understood as such? Or is it perhaps also something like a secret teaching of Jesus? You mentioned this underlying esoteric aspect.

KS: It is a Christian source, or a Christian scripture, in any case, because the central figure in it is Jesus. You can definitely say that those who wrote the Gospel of Thomas saw themselves as Christians. As I said, it has a very independent theological approach and emphasizes knowledge very strongly. On the other hand, there are strong mystical features such as: Whoever drinks from the mouth of Jesus will become like him. There is a kind of mystical union taking place when one penetrates the teachings of Jesus in this sense. Such writings certainly lend themselves well to modern fiction. From a historical point of view, however, the Gospel of Thomas is interesting above all because it represents a form of Jesus tradition that is not biographically oriented but places a strong emphasis on the oral tradition. In particular, we see in it a reconciliation of early Christianity with contemporary philosophy, especially Platonism. Some examples of this: Those who, according to the Gospel of Thomas, belong to Jesus, who are elect, they have an immortal soul, which comes from the divine realm and is supposed to return there. Another interesting point is that Jesus' death is mentioned only in passing. Jesus appears first and foremost as the Living One. Jesus is the one who lives and who imparts eternal life. Finally, there is an approach to Platonic theology: God is only spoken of in a veiled way. For example, it says: "Adam came into being from a great power and a great wealth, (...)" But it doesn't say that Adam was created by God. Finally, Adam became estranged from God and died, which shows a strong interest in creating a distance between God and creation. To summarize, this is a time, in which parts of antique Christianity are very open to experimentation and try to present themselves on the philosophical market of opportunities.

FM: In my introduction, I raised the question whether the wisdom of Jesus is more of a divinely inspired wisdom, or whether there are also profane elements in there. If we take the Gospel of Thomas: would you categorize that as divine? It sounded a bit like the aphorisms that you described. Or are there perhaps also quite mundane instructions for the life of the individual?

KS: Yes, there are certainly also profane hints, instructions on how to cope with one's life. There you can see clear ascetic traits. For example, there is a regular call to stay away from the world. And on the other hand, of course, one has to say that the image of Jesus in this writing is deeply imbued with religion. As I said, it has mystical aspects. And Jesus speaks of God throughout, also of the Father, or of my Father, so it is quite clear that Jesus stands in a very close relationship to God and this scripture then also gains its authority from this. Jesus is called the 'Living One', and God too, can be called the 'Living One'. As I said, these words are up for interpretation. That is the claim of this scripture: Whoever finds the interpretation of these words has found eternal life. That, of course, is a deeply religious model.

FM: Yes, also a very challenging scripture. Thank you, Mr. Schwarz, for taking the time to speak with us. And thank you, dear listeners, for your interest in this podcast. As always, I would like to invite you to follow further Wisdom Talks and to explore the media offerings on the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices on www.metis.ethz.ch, for example by following the link below to access the booklets to the podcast. Thank you for your time and goodbye.

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