

The Inbreaking of the Kingdom – *And the Word Became Flesh*

I. Introduction

1. As we enter the New Testament and the “fullness of the times,” we’re immediately confronted with the *incarnation* and its contribution to the biblical doctrine of the Messiah.
2. Historically, the so-called “christological controversies” of early church history focused on the divine-human dynamics in Jesus’ person and nature, *but more from a philosophical than a biblical standpoint*. That is, they approached these issues in the *abstract* (Jesus as “God” and Jesus as “man”) rather than in terms of the *Bible’s* perspective and presentation.

The christological controversies arose out of early trinitarian considerations and disputes that focused on the nature and extent of Jesus’ divinity and His place in the Godhead. If true deity is ascribed to Him, how does this implicate His humanness? And how do the divine and human natures exist and function within the same human person? *In general, these controversies reflected concern for the primacy either of biblical monotheism (one true God), or the Scripture’s presentation of Jesus as a truly human son of Adam, Abraham, and David.*

- a. The *Ebionites* were an early Jewish Christian sect that held to a quasi-Jewish form of messianism. They were “adoptionists,” maintaining that Jesus was a man whom God uniquely adopted as His son and empowered with His Spirit for his messianic work.
 - b. *Docetism* was another early belief structure in Christianity. It paralleled the Gnostic philosophy that preceded the Christian era in the Greco-Roman world. There were differences among its adherents, but all Docetists denied Jesus’ true, physical humanness.
 - c. Somewhat later, *Monarchianism* gained a following among Christians. In its two forms, Monarchianism emphasized the absolute *unity of God*. The one form held that Father, Son, and Spirit are three modes of operation of the one God; the other viewed Jesus as a man who was progressively “deified” by adoption and God’s transforming work in Him.
 - d. Such controversies concerning Jesus’ divine and human *natures* led to later doctrines and disputes regarding the relationship between the two natures and Jesus’ *person*. One view, often associated with Nestorius, maintained Jesus’ full deity and humanity, but argued that these two natures remained distinct and don’t comprise one unified human person; two unique natures cannot form one hypostasis (i.e., a hypostatic union). Others argued that Jesus’ human nature was absorbed by His divine nature, while others maintained that the two natures merged to form a unique, blended nature, so that Jesus’ human existence was entirely distinct; He wasn’t a man in the same way as other human beings are.
3. The Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) sought to establish a biblical doctrine of Christ (*christology*) according to His two natures existing in one person, but it didn’t put an end to the controversies. Indeed, disputes regarding the doctrine of incarnation continue to this day.

But again, what is important to note here is that historical christological controversies and doctrinal formulations in the Church have tended to reflect and work within the abstract philosophical categories of deity (“God”) and humanness (“man”), rather than in the way the Scriptures perceive and interact with these truths.

II. The Scripture's Perspective on Incarnation

A. Purpose and Promise

1. The incarnation presupposes and serves God's formation of man as image-son (priestly vice-regent) on behalf of the creation. That design lay behind God's *protoevangelium* pledge in Eden, which led to Abraham's election as God's human agent of blessing for all mankind.
2. Because of man's role as mediator of the Creator/creation relationship, human alienation brought the curse of alienation and death on the wider creation. Thus God's election of Abraham and his family looked beyond mankind and its future. Man was the source of the creation's calamity, and so it was to be with its restoration. *In scriptural terms, the creation's destiny hinged on Israel's faithfulness to its election and calling, and yet the covenant people couldn't be the remedy for the creational curse that they themselves were subject to.*
3. This human obligation and quandary underlies the solution the Scriptures disclose: God was committed to a human deliverer/restorer, and this required a man who could prevail over the curse, but so as to achieve that same outcome for the human race and the creation under human rule. This man would have to be a true image-son, but as a *first fruit*. Given God's covenant oath to Abraham, this person would have to be Israel in truth, thereby enabling Israel to fulfill its mandate to be the instrument of mankind's reconciliation and ingathering.
4. The OT scriptures progressively build this case, even as they tell Israel's story within God's purposes. Isaiah's four servant songs (42:1-7, 49:1-7, 50:4-9, 52:13-53:12) provide a key focal point in this unfolding story. These poems disclose and celebrate a servant "Israel" whom the prophet presented as the central figure in Yahweh's return to Zion to deliver and restore Abraham's family, that they should fulfill their covenant calling on behalf of the nations. Each of the four poems makes its own distinct contribution to the servant depiction, but in a progressive and cumulative way as described in the previous section.
5. Yahweh was adamant that Israel's desolation and exile would not be the last word. He would arise as their Redeemer, just as He had done with their forefathers in Egypt. *A second exodus awaited Abraham's children, but of an entirely different sort.* For this time they needed to be delivered, not from another nation's power, but their own spiritual adultery. Their exile was the result of covenant unfaithfulness, so that this new redemption would require forgiveness, cleansing and reconciliation. But Yahweh would indeed deal with this enslaving power, just as He had done with Egypt's pharaoh. The servant songs, then, clarify how He would do this.
6. Isaiah closely associates this servant "Israel" (who represents the true Abrahamic "seed") with Yahweh Himself (cf. 52:13 with 6:1, 57:15), but stops short of directly indicating the phenomenon of incarnation (7:14 arguably comes the closest with the sign of Immanuel). *What is clear is that this servant would embody faithful Israel and be Yahweh's human instrument, through the power of His Spirit, for redeeming Israel for the sake of the world.*

B. Fulfillment and Result

Israel's scriptures don't speak of incarnation as such, and addressing this doctrine in terms of the abstract categories of deity and humanity only further isolates it from them. *In contrast to the traditional formulations and historical arguments regarding natures and persons, the Scripture treats the incarnation as the God of Israel taking up Israel's life and circumstance in Himself.*

1. God's goal for His creation was *sacred space*: being present and manifest in His creation in and through intimate communion with His image-children. Israel's existence underscored that goal, and His sanctuary in their presence signified that intimacy as the place of Father-son encounter – the place where heaven and earth converged.
2. But Israel shared in the creation's alienation, and thus Yahweh pledged a day when He would remedy that condition and finally establish the perfect intimacy He intended. He issued that promise to Israel, but it pertained to the whole creation. *Reconciling Israel had its goal in reconciling all things to Himself.*
3. And increasingly over time, the prophets seemed to concentrate that work in a particular Israelite who is the promised son of David. *This individual would be the focal point in Yahweh's return to Zion to redeem and restore Israel, and he would embody Israel as the true son of Abraham in whom Israel would return to God in order to fulfill their election and calling on behalf of the world. This "Israel" would embody both sides of the covenant and its obligations, and so embody all of God's will, words and works. Hence John's declaration that Jesus is the Word become flesh.*
4. By embodying both covenant parties and fulfilling the covenant relationship from both sides (Isa. 42:1-7, 49:1-10), this Israelite would bring covenant Father and son together in truth and righteousness *in Himself*. He would be the point of divine-human encounter and communion, and this is why Yahweh's prophets connected him with His *sanctuary*.
 - a. This association is perhaps most pronounced in Isaiah's prophecy, who spoke of all people streaming to Yahweh's sanctuary on Mount Zion, and then declared that the messianic son of David was to be that rallying point (cf. Isa. 2:1-3, 11:1-13). He further hinted that Yahweh would make this messianic figure the firm cornerstone in His sanctuary – a stone upon which His "house" would be built. * 28:16; cf. Zech. 6:9-15
 - b. Not surprisingly, then, the apostle John treated Jesus' birth as the promised restoration of Yahweh's sanctuary and the return of His divine glory to again fill it. * John 1:14-18
5. The sanctuary was the place of divine-human encounter, and so the preeminent image for incarnation. Indeed, the incarnation fulfilled the sanctuary and its role in God's purposes, *but in a way that infinitely transcends it: The sanctuary brought God and Israel together spatially, but incarnation has brought them together ontologically.*
 - a. Yahweh returned to Israel by taking up Israel's life and lot in Himself; the birth of the Israelite, Jesus of Nazareth, was God forever *humanizing* Himself. That is, incarnation involved God's determination in self-giving love to have His own existence forever bound up in human existence. Thus the doctrine of a triune God is the doctrine of the God who has assumed human existence into Himself.
 - b. So also the incarnation was the beginning of the *true human existence* for which man was created: man as image-son bearing and manifesting the life and likeness of God, such that seeing the son is seeing the Father. * cf. John 5:1-23, 10:22-38, 14:1-11, 15:18-25, etc.
6. In the incarnation, then, God has fully revealed **Himself** and His **human creature**. *Jesus is God unto man and man unto God, and that for the sake of God's all-comprehending design for His creation.* Hence Paul's christology – Eph. 1:1-3:12; Col. 1:15-20, 2:9-10