

13. HOW CAN GOD BECOME A HUMAN BEING? THE INCARNATION.

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1. The most striking aspect of the promise of salvation in the Old Testament is that God announces his own coming, his own direct intervention:

- 1.1. Those who God had appointed to care for the people had neglected their duties and failed in their mission:

1The word of the LORD came to me: 2“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? 3You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. (Ezekiel 34.1-3)

- 1.2. The only solution for God is to become himself the shepherd of his people

11“For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. 12As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. 13And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. 14I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. 15I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. 16I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice. (Ezekiel 34.11-16)

2. How was this prophecy fulfilled? It is significant that the oldest images of Jesus represent him as a shepherd:

- 2.1. The earliest existing image of the Good Shepherd dates back to the 2nd century and can be found in Domitilla's catacomb in Rome



3. This iconographic choice is probably more eloquent than any of the theological treatises on the identity of Jesus written in the first few centuries of Christianity.
4. Most of these treatises, even to our days, try to argue for the 'necessity' of God becoming a human being by saying that
 - 4.1. Since a human being had sinned, a human being had to be punished

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- 4.2. No human being could pay the price of a transgression made against God, so only God could save us
- 4.3. So the saviour had to be a human being and God at the same time.
- 5. What we are told by the image of the Good Shepherd is another story: no human being was able to take care of us, to comfort us, to come to our rescue properly – as God wanted to do – so God found a way of doing it by himself.
 - I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. (John 10:11-15)
- 6. We saw that Jesus never says of himself “I am God”, but reveals that he is God in ways which can be recognized only if one is familiar with the promises of the Old Testament and the way in which God talked about himself. Only against this background we can see that in this sentence Jesus
 - 6.1. Is claiming to be God fulfilling the promise of coming in person to shepherd his people
 - 6.2. He is not saying that he acts as a representative of God the Shepherd, but he says “I am the good shepherd”
 - 6.3. Especially in the Gospel of John, this “I AM” echoes the name of God given to Moses, “Yahweh”, “I AM WHO I AM”.
- 7. Here we are confronted with the ‘core’ of what we call the “incarnation”, that is the Christian belief that Jesus is God made flesh:
 - 7.1. Whenever Jesus says “I” we are in the presence of the “I” of God
 - 7.2. Or, to use the received theological terminology, the person of Jesus is the person of God.¹
- 8. This is the object of the Prologue of the Gospel of John:
 - In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
 - 8.1. That God is Word simply means that he is ‘eager to talk to us, to be in conversation with us, to make himself known to us’.
 - And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.
 - 8.2. “Flesh’ here does not mean simply the body but ‘the whole of human condition’ – the same sentence can be translated “In his eagerness to communicate with us, God became one of us – while remaining what HE IS”.
 - No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.
 - 8.3. God wants to make himself known to us but cannot be seen – so he has found a way of making himself ‘perceivable’ by us.
- 9. The emphasis in John’s prologue is on the Incarnation as a way for God of making himself known to us – but there is a subtext in the original Greek:

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¹ Technically this is called the ‘hypostatic union’ from ‘hypostasis’ which in Greek means ‘person’ – the ‘personal union’.

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- 9.1. the English translation “dwelt among us” tries to convey the meaning of the verb “eskenosen” which literally means: “God planted his tent among us”
- 9.2. this is a veiled reference to the Tent of the Covenant which accompanied the people of Israel in its journey through the desert – to mean that God wants to ‘journey’ with us, live with us, walk with us.
- 10. Another layer to the reality of the Incarnation is added by the opening verses of the 1st letter of John:
 - 1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—
 - 2 the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—
 - 3 that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1-3)
- 10.1. God does not want just ‘to be known’ but ‘to be touched’ and ‘to touch’ us
- 10.2. Just as a doctor who does not just tell us what we need to find healing, but tends to our wounds.
- 11. This leaves open a question which the first generations of Christians grappled with for 4 centuries before reaching some clarity of it with the Council of Chalcedon (451)
 - 11.1. If when Jesus says “I” it is God who says “I”
 - 11.2. What happens to Jesus’ mind? Does he even have a human mind?
 - 11.3. Same thing about his will: if when Jesus wants something, it is God who wants something – does he even have a human will?
- 12. Two Christian thinkers in particular came to represent two opposite ways of dealing with this issue, Nestorius and Apollinarius.
- 13. Nestorius was the Patriarch of Constantinople from 428 to 431 CE
 - 13.1. During his time people became fond of referring to Mary and the “Mother of God”
 - 13.2. Nestorius was worried about this title – “How can God have a mother”?
 - 13.3. The promoters of this title however were simply arguing that if Jesus was really God then when Mary gave birth to Jesus, she became the mother of God.
 - 13.4. The only aim of this title was to confess that Jesus is really and fully God.
 - 13.5. Nestorius was worried that in this way Jesus could not be seen as fully and totally human.
- 14. Apollinarius (died 382 CE) was on the opposite front
 - 14.1. For him the only way of affirming that Jesus was really God was to say that although he was really a human being Jesus did not have a human ‘mind’ or ‘intellect’ (some translators say ‘soul’ – the Greek word is nous)
 - 14.2. The mind of Jesus was the Logos, that is the ‘mind’ of God.
- 15. One of the problems of these theologians was the starting point of their thinking
 - 15.1. They began with ‘anthropology’ that is with a given idea of what ‘to be human’ means for each one of us from a philosophical viewpoint
 - 15.2. Moreover, they had a ‘competitive’ approach to the relation between humanity and divinity
 - 15.3. In simple terms, they saw Jesus as a glass filled with two different liquids (say oil and water): the more oil you put in the glass, the less space there is for water (and viceversa).

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16. They had lost sight of the fact that even for any human being, 'more God' does not mean 'less humanity' – or 'more grace' does not mean 'less freedom'
 - 16.1. On the contrary, even for everyone of us, the more we receive God's grace, the more we grow in freedom
 - 16.2. It is not an accident that people like Nestorius (the so-called "School of Antioch") had a tendency to undermine the role of God's grace in human holiness and people in the 'school' of Apollinarius (the so-called "School of Alexandria") would downplay the human will.
17. Just in the same way, in Jesus 'more God' means 'more humanity'.
18. The most fascinating aspect of this controversy is how, little by little, theological reflection found the way of establishing an agreement.
 - 18.1. They understood that the solution could not be found in philosophical arguments about humanity (Anthropology), even though these were useful.
 - 18.2. And that they could not consider God and humanity as two comparable 'entities' – and therefore potentially in competition with each other.
19. The solution was to be found in the field of 'soteriology' that is the branch of theology that focusses on salvation (soter in Greek means 'saviour') and especially in a sentence by Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 390 CE) who was briefly the Patriarch of Constantinople
 - 19.1. The sentence was
"That which is not taken up (or assumed) is not healed" (Letter to Cledonius)
 - 19.2. The idea is that by becoming a human being God has healed us.
 - 19.3. If someone has a wound in his flesh, she only needs a doctor to tend to the body.
 - 19.4. The problem of humanity however is that we are wounded in our will (we want to do what is right but we end up doing what is wrong) and in our mind (we do not even understand what is right and we deceive ourselves).
 - 19.5. So, we need healing also for our mind and our will.
 - 19.6. This is why the divine Healer has assumed (in the Incarnation) the whole of our human nature.
20. The lesson to be drawn from this aspect of the Christological controversy is that the best way to think about it is not to try to think about the how of the Incarnation but about the why.
21. The how of the Incarnation clearly is beyond what we can fathom.
 - 21.1. How can a human being be God?
 - 21.2. How can one person have two wills or two 'minds'?
 - 21.3. How can the omniscient God become a human being who openly acknowledges not to know everything?²
 - 21.4. How can the omnipotent God become so powerless that he is abandoned, betrayed, arrested, tortured, and crucified?
 - 21.5. How can the immortal God die?
22. The only way to think properly about the Incarnation is to reflect on the why – and for this we have God's own declarations: the only way for us to be healed is for God to become able to touch us, to take us up on his shoulder, as our Good Shepherd.

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² Cf. Mt 24:36 – Concerning that day and hour [the end of time] no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.