

Incarnation: The death of crass egoism

The incarnation provides a fuller picture of the filial and familial relationship between God and persons He has created. God as a husband pursuing his unfaithful wife (Israel) in the book of Hosea is all part and parcel of Judaism. However, Christians believe Jesus is the embodiment, literally the incarnation, of these attributes which provides deliverances from egoism. Several inferences from the incarnation are relevant here: First, Jesus chose to identify with those unable to deliver themselves or even have a voice in the geo-political and socio-economic issues of the day. Second, Jesus identified with and personally experienced human suffering. Third, Jesus' character, commitment, and moral integrity were such that He endured to the point of death. Granted, Christians believe Jesus is far more than these admirable qualities but from an intellectually objective historical vantage point Jesus of Nazareth was nothing short of remarkable.

In the gospel narratives the incarnation was ground zero in a life destined for death. In addition to the crucifixion, we should remember that Jesus was not unaccustomed to suffering. A brief reading of the Gospels reveals that Jesus' actions toward human suffering were anything but indifferent. He showed mercy to a woman accused of adultery, ministered to the physically handicapped, welcomed societal outcasts, ministered to the ill, wept over his friend's death, was rejected by his own family, falsely accused, betrayed by a close friend, and suffered a tortuous death.¹ In Jesus we see compassion in the territory most often inhabited by crass egoism.

If Jesus had an actual experiential knowledge of human suffering via personal experience, rather than a merely cognitive one, then the gravity of his words about these realities

¹ Matt. 12:46-50; Mk. 7:32-34, 14:56; Lk. 7:34, 18:39, 22:47-48, 23:1-49; Jn. 8:1-11, 11:35.

deepens tremendously.² He did not speak of suffering from an Athenian ivory tower but from under the iron heel of Roman oppression and fanatical intolerance from a religious establishment that sought his death. Even the agnostic Albert Camus notes the extraordinary implications of Jesus' death concerning the enigma of evil and suffering:

His solution consisted, first, in experiencing them. The god-man suffers too, with patience. Evil and death can no longer be entirely imputed to him since he suffers and dies. The night on Golgotha is so important in the history of man only because, in its shadows, the divinity, ostensibly abandoning its traditional privileges, lived through to the end, despair included, the agony of death. Thus is explained the *Lama sabachthani* and the frightful doubt of Christ in agony.³

Solidarity with humanity by entering the totality of the human experience is a salient feature of the incarnation. Jesus entered the fray in human flesh, not in a quasi-angelic form immune to human frailty and experienced the full range of human temptations while retaining his moral purity.⁴ Keith Ward notes, "Perhaps the central distinctive teaching of Christianity is that the Divine shares in creaturely suffering, in order that the material order may be liberated from bondage to selfish desire, and transfigured to share in the life of eternity."⁵ This is the death of egoism. It was the proverbial actor coming out of the director's chair and playing the lead part in the drama that led to the ultimate sacrifice of the director.⁶ Baggett and Walls describe the

² "Loving us, God does not give us something, but Himself; and giving us Himself, giving us His only Son, He gives us everything." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God*, Vol. II, Part 1, trans. G. W. Bromiley, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 276.

³ *Essais* [Paris: Gallimard, 1965], 144. Bruce A. Ward, "Prometheus or Cain? Albert Camus's Account of the Western Quest for Justice," *Faith and Philosophy* (April 1991): 213. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 487-488.

⁴ "For certainly no seed ever fell from so fair a tree into so dark and cold a soil." C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 149. This is one of the main points of the letter to the Hebrews and is eloquently expressed by William L. Lane in his commentary, *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 2004).

⁵ Ward, *Religion and Human Nature*, 5.

⁶ Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, 150-174. N. T. Wright writes, "What the Gospels offer is not a philosophical explanation of evil, what it is or why it's there, nor a set of suggestions for how we might adjust our lifestyles so that evil will mysteriously disappear from the world, but the story of an *event* in which the living God *deals with it*." N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 93.

incarnation as “a picture of the divine condescending to take human flesh, one person both wholly divine and wholly human. No greater portrait of integration and rapprochement of the natural and supernatural, God and cosmos, is easy to envision.”⁷ Therefore, the claim that God set the parameters of universal operations does not detract from the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual pain endured by Jesus.⁸

For Christians, the incarnation and passion of Jesus provides an even deeper consolation in the face of evil. Jesus’ hard-hitting sermons on children and the penalties for those who harm them avoid the scythe of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s words, “Those who have continued to live on in comfort scold those who suffered”⁹ intended for hypocritical pedantic naggers. On the contrary, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish,” is a merciful act of pointing to the way of deliverance in lieu of the coming judgment (Lk. 13:1-9). Obedience to Jesus’ commands is holistic. *Mere* verbal confession to a collection of theological abstractions is foreign to the New Testament.¹⁰ In addition to fulfilling the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus’ uniqueness can be seen in his prescribed ethical norms that, in the words of L. Rush Bush, “will improve our life if followed, but that will crush us if they are rejected and ignored.”¹¹ Jesus’ regard for the weak and mercy to the downcast provided a new paradigm of human-to-human relationships where egoism is overcome by love.¹²

⁷ Baggett and Walls, *God & Cosmos*, 52-53.

⁸ See William A. Dembski’s treatment on the extent of the cross. William A. Dembski, *The End of Christianity: Finding a Good God in an Evil World* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 16-22.

⁹ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 1.

¹⁰ In the words of Gordon Kaufman, “Believing in God is not simply a matter of the confession of a few words: It involves a reordering of our whole existence in its socio-cultural as well as its individual and personal dimensions.” Gordon Kaufman, “What Shall We Do with the Bible?” *Interpretation* 25, no. 95 (1971): 112.

¹¹ Bush, *The Advancement*, 105.

¹² Jesus went where others would not and associated with forgotten as Gerald L. Borchert comments, “When Jesus went to Jerusalem, he did not spend his time in elite hostels; nor did he concentrate his ministry merely in the temple or give attention to the rich and famous who could help him politically and financially with his ministry. He

At the cross we see God's wrath against sin not poured out against the wicked but on an innocent, voluntary substitute. "Or, as the old evangelistic tract put it, the nations of the world got together to pronounce judgment on God for all the evils of the world, only to realize with a shock that God had already served his sentence."¹³ Christians believe the resurrection was necessary for salvation but incarnation and death are required ingredients in the economy of resurrection. J. R. R. Tolkien puts it this way, "The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy."¹⁴ Alvin Plantinga paints the beautiful brokenness of the passion as follows:

He was subjected to ridicule, rejection, and finally the cruel and humiliating death of the cross. Horrifying as that is, Jesus, the Word, the son of God, suffered something vastly more horrifying: abandonment by God, exclusion from his love and affection: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" All this to enable human beings to be reconciled to God, and to achieve eternal life. This overwhelming display of love and mercy is not merely the greatest story ever told; it is the greatest story that could be told. No other great-making property of a world can match this one.¹⁵

According to Christian theism, the incarnation to the resurrection of Christ is not just a source of revelation by which we can know God but a medium through which we can understand our own humanity and find hope for overcoming the destructive drag of our lower desires.¹⁶

concentrated on people in need, which for the elite of society was part of his problem. In this story [John 5] he visited the pool below the temple where the helpless dregs of society lay in a pathetic state." Gerald L. Borchert, *The New American Commentary: John 1-11*, Vol. 25A (Nashville: B&H, 1996), 231.

¹³ Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 94.

¹⁴ J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," 24. In Schuman, "J. R. R. Tolkien and the Significance of Fairy-Story," *Apologia*, 21, <http://www.dartmouthapologia.org/articles/show/81>.

¹⁵ Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, 975.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard somberly pleads, "But even if it is very pleasant for flesh and blood to avoid opposition, I wonder if it is a comfort also in the hour of death. In the hour of death, surely the only comfort is that one has not avoided opposition but has suffered it." Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1995), 84.