

# God Incarnate: some reflections from an Old Testament perspective

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It is a sound old adage that you do something better if you know what it is that you are doing. If, therefore, we are to reflect upon the incarnation from an Old Testament perspective, it is as well to be sure what it is that we are reflecting upon. This means that we must start by asking what we mean by 'The Incarnation', or alternatively 'God Incarnate'.<sup>1</sup>

In much traditional Christian theology, the meaning of the incarnation has been clear, at least in basic outline. God has acted decisively to redeem a fallen world by coming into the world in the person of the man Jesus Christ. The Word, who was in the beginning with God, and was God, assumed human nature, became man, and lived as a man among men. He did not thereby cease to be God, but was truly God and truly man at the same time. As such, he was uniquely fitted to bring reconciliation between God and man.

This understanding of the incarnation has not always been unquestioned, and in recent times, in particular, it has been widely challenged by theologians who have argued the need not so much to abandon as to reinterpret the term so that its essential meaning can speak more clearly to the modern world. Although such arguments take a wide variety of forms which resist simple analysis, one common approach is to argue, not that Jesus was both God and man, but that Jesus was a man who was uniquely open to and obedient to God, so that God was as fully active in Jesus as he could be in any man. There is thus no absolute ontological difference between Jesus and other men as implied by the traditional view, but merely a difference of degree. Jesus perfectly exemplifies what human life under God can, in principle, be for anyone. It is because he is so open to God and to the leading of God's Spirit, that God may be said to be 'incarnate' in him.

Why have scholars felt the need to reinterpret the meaning of *incarnation* in this way? And how is one to choose between them and the traditional position? Obviously this is not the place for a comprehensive answer, for my primary aim is the more modest one of suggesting ways in which the Old Testament might shed light upon the incarnation. But I think it will be appropriate and helpful if, before turning to the Old Testament, I make three general preliminary points to try to clarify some of the issues at stake in the contemporary debate.

First, let me be bold and venture to say what I consider to be *the* central issue which underlies the whole debate, in relation to which arguments about the origin and growth of New Testament concepts, the intelligibility of *homoousios*, and the need for contemporary Christological models, are all of secondary importance. This is quite simply the problem of how we talk about the action of God. In what sense does God *do* things? What, in particular, does it mean to say that God became man? Is such language literal, metaphorical, poetic, mythical or what?

In the Bible, God is constantly active, constantly doing things. He not only acts and shows his power, often in unusual and spiritually meaningful ways (what we call 'miracles'), but he also speaks and communicates verbally to man, proclaiming things both past, present and future. This biblical presentation of a God who says and does things that make a difference in the world, underlies all the traditional Christian formulations of faith. But while the Bible constantly sets forth a God who speaks and acts in a wide variety of ways, it rarely offers any critical self-reflection as to how exactly this language is to be understood. (One example may be seen in Jeremiah 18:7–10, with its recognition that statements that are unconditional in form may in fact be conditional in intention.) In general, Christians have assumed that, unless there are obvious indications to the contrary, such language is to be understood in a straightforward, literal way: God literally, in fact, became man. But is this necessarily the correct approach? And what are the alternatives?

Countless scholars have argued the need for a less obviously straightforward interpretation of such language. For how does one give *content* to talk about God doing things? For example, the Old Testament says that God destroyed Jerusalem and sent Judah into exile as punishment for their sin. But it is not the case that God somehow intervened miraculously to overthrow the city, with fire from heaven or whatever. For any historian can show a complex of political, military, economic and other factors which account for the fall of Jerusalem and which provide a comprehensive historical explanation. To say that this was an act of God is not to point to any new fact or any overt intervention on God's part, but rather to offer an *interpretation* of the historian's data from a moral and religious perspective. To describe the fall of Jerusalem as an act of God is to look at, and talk about, an agreed set of data in a particular way—a moral and religious way, rather than a purely historical way.

This understanding of the action of God as essentially a religious interpretation of otherwise explicable events, which is reasonably straightforward in such a case as the fall of Jerusalem, then becomes a norm for understanding *all* language about God's activity. Even those cases which do seem to invoke the action of God as adding a new, and often otherwise inexplicable, fact into the human scene are taken to

be really a religious interpretation of non-miraculous events. Take, for example, the virginal conception of Jesus. Although the story in Luke 1 does clearly describe a miraculous divine intervention in Mary's conception of Jesus, it is suggested that what this really means is not that Jesus did not have a human father, but that the whole life of Jesus, from its earliest beginnings, was under the guidance and purposes of God; a truth best expressed in 'mythical' story form. It is this sort of approach that underlies the insistence that we must reinterpret the incarnation. To speak of God becoming man in Jesus is not to describe a specific, literal happening in space and time, for that is not, apparently, what this sort of language means. Rather it is to offer an interpretation of the man Jesus as a man uniquely obedient to, and guided by, God.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of these two ways (simplified, but not, I hope, distorted) of understanding language about God's activity? The strength of the traditional, 'literalist' approach is clear. It stresses the objective reality of God. Whether we like it or not, he is there and he makes a difference. This has always been basic to Christian belief. The weakness of the approach is that it can tend to be over-simple in understanding the relationship of God to human events. It easily falls into the trap of saying that something cannot be the action of God *unless* it is otherwise inexplicable. This *non sequitur* was most famously and disastrously made by Sir Isaac Newton. Newton considered most phenomena susceptible of rational and scientific explanation, with little or no reference to God needed. But when certain phenomena defied his powers of scientific explanation, he brought in God as a *deus ex machina* and said that the otherwise inexplicable phenomena must be the work of God. The weakness of this is obvious. As scientific knowledge increases, and previously puzzling data become scientifically explicable, that which can be attributed to God becomes less and less, until finally why should one bother at all to posit the action of God as an explanation of phenomena? Quite rightly, Laplace had no need for such an hypothesis. A 'God of the gaps' is ultimately no God at all.

The alternative approach, that of seeing the action of God as religious interpretation, has the merit of stressing the importance of faith for Christian understanding. Events do not happen in isolation, nor are they viewed by a *tabula rasa*. A person's interpretative framework is of crucial importance for the way he sees and experiences things. As a rule, acts of God don't just 'stand out', clear for all to see. For the Christian, belief in God must necessarily lead to viewing things in a particular way, in the light of God. It is one's framework of interpretation—one's faith—that makes the difference.

Yet his approach, too, has its defects. For it runs the risk of reducing the reality of God to a 'mere' interpretation, with the

implication that there is something ultimately arbitrary about it. A and B both view event X. A interprets it as an act of God; B does not. On what grounds could one argue that A was right and B wrong? If there are no more facts available which might tip the balance, and it is just a matter of how one interprets the same facts, it is difficult ultimately to escape a thoroughgoing subjectivism. 'This is how I see it', or 'This is true for me', becomes the most that one can say. 'This is true'—period—ceases to be a realistic or meaningful claim. While many would, no doubt, be content to acquiesce in such a position, it can hardly be denied that it represents a massive dilution, and not just reinterpretation, of the historic Christian faith.

This is not the place to attempt to resolve this issue of how to interpret language about God's activity, but I would make three brief comments. First, each approach outlined above is strong in what it affirms and weak in what it denies (or tends to deny). It is vital to maintain both the objective reality of God and his actions, and also the need for the subjective element of faith and interpretation. Both are necessary and neither need exclude the other. Secondly, we must allow that God acts in a variety of ways; this is the consistent witness both of the Scriptures and of Christian experience. It is therefore wrong to take just one model of God's activity and turn it into a Procrustean framework to which every action of God must be made to conform. Thirdly, discussions in this area often operate with a quite unjustifiable dichotomy between event and interpretation, as though history somehow consisted of 'bare facts' to which interpretation could somehow be added at will. Rather we need to see that event and interpretation are not separable. Interpretation need not be some semi-arbitrary addition to 'the facts', but may rather be an inherent part of the facts, so that (at least sometimes) the only fully accurate and true way to describe something is to describe it as, say, an act of God.

Now all this is essentially a matter of philosophical theology, which is beyond my competence. We badly need a study which carefully defines and analyses terms such as 'event', 'fact', 'action', 'interpretation' (which we so loosely bandy around) and which provides us with appropriate models for understanding the ways God acts in the world. There has been, of course, a good deal of recent work which does cover aspects of this problem.<sup>2</sup> But until more work is done, and further clarification received, discussions about the incarnation will continue to be bedevilled by fundamental uncertainties and ambiguities as to how and in what way it can be meaningful to speak of God becoming man in Christ.

My second preliminary observation is to re-emphasize the fact that the doctrine of the incarnation cannot be considered in isolation. The incarnation is basically a doctrine about God and about the nature of his dealings with man, and so it needs to be considered in the broader

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context of the doctrine of God and of salvation. It is this latter, in particular, that can be of crucial significance. For, in general terms, it will be one's understanding of the nature of man's sin and of his need for salvation that will either require, or else reject as irrelevant, certain types of saving activity on God's behalf. In technical terms, Christology, and in particular incarnational Christology, is usually controlled by soteriology; though, of course, the two influence each other.

This principle was particularly well illustrated in the fourth century AD, the period in which orthodox incarnational theology received its classical form and expression as a result of the Arian controversy. In this controversy, both Arian and orthodox Christologies were firmly subject to rival soteriologies. The primacy of soteriology has long been recognized in the case of Athanasius and the Alexandrians. The recent study by Gregg and Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation*,<sup>3</sup> has persuasively argued that it was soteriology that was equally the dominant concern of the Arians. And since, for the Arians, Christ was essentially a model of the moral achievement and religious progress which was in principle open to anyone, and which at its culmination brought adoption as sons of God, incarnation in any but an attenuated sense of divine grace and assistance became simply irrelevant.

One of the most notable recent reinterpretations of the incarnation, Lampe's *God as Spirit*,<sup>4</sup> is another good example of the integral connection between incarnation and soteriology. Lampe says,

The foundation of Christology is the conviction that in Jesus God himself has acted. He has not addressed men from the far side of the gulf which divides Creator from creatures and urged them to repent. Through Jesus he has done for men that which they could not do for themselves. So far, most Christians would agree. But what is it that God has done for us through Jesus? Upon the answer to this question the form of our Christology is likely to depend.

Lampe then goes on to sketch some traditional Christian conceptions of salvation and comments on them,

If these traditional pictures, or any others which depict salvation as a decisive act of God performed at a definite point in history, represent that which God has done for us in Jesus, then no doubt the best model for Christology is the divine person of the pre-existent Son who comes down into the world of human sin...

Lampe himself, for a variety of reasons, finds the traditional pictures of salvation untenable, and so interprets salvation as an ongoing process of moral transformation, brought about by God's Spirit,

which is continuous with, and an extension and completion of, the process of creation. In the light of this he affirms that

God has always been incarnate in his human creatures, forming their spirits from within and revealing himself in and through them;

Jesus is distinctive insofar as he displays perfectly what other people experience partially:

In Jesus the incarnate presence of God evoked a full and constant response of the human spirit. This was not a different divine presence, but the same God the Spirit who moved and inspired other men, such as the prophets. It was not a different kind of human response, but it was total instead of partial.<sup>5</sup>

I have dwelt at some length on Lampe's exposition because he exemplifies so lucidly how a strong incentive to reinterpret the meaning of incarnation comes from a reinterpretation of salvation. I would make one brief comment on his approach before passing on.

In most general terms, Lampe stands in continuity with an ancient and oft-adopted stance within the Christian church which lays particular emphasis on the moral transformation of man as the essential ingredient of salvation. Nonetheless it is not unfair to say that the predominant voices within the church have usually laid greater stress on the sovereign grace of God and the sinfulness of man. One can easily hear echoes of the issues debated between, say, Arius and Athanasius, Pelagius and Augustine, Erasmus and Luther, Harnack and Barth. Obviously one should not polarize unnecessarily; the one side does not deny the need for God's grace, nor does the other deny the need for man's moral transformation. Yet the fact that it is those who have laid greater stress on the radical nature of sin and salvation—over against a stance which is prone to succumb to moralism—who have generally been recognized as somehow the more central and authentically Christian voices, should at least make one hesitant in espousing the sort of view of salvation that Lampe proposes. And doubts about his soteriology will also become doubts about his Christology.

My third preliminary observation concerns a four-letter word that has had wide usage and acquired a certain notoriety in recent discussions of the incarnation; that is, 'myth'. This follows from my two previous observations. For, on the one hand, much usage of 'myth' has been in the context of attempting to evaluate language about God's workings in the world. On the other hand, it has been the traditional Christian scheme of salvation, dependent as it is upon a realistic doctrine of the fall, that has had the status of 'myth' attached to it long before the term was ever applied to the incarnation.

It is, in the first place, highly unfortunate that the one word 'myth' can be used in profoundly different senses. If the senses were always clearly distinguished, the situation might be tolerable; but when the term is used equivocally, then chaos must follow. The popular understanding of 'myth' is of something fictitious, delusive or untrue. In general, scholars eschew this sense of the term (though it is regrettable that the writers of *The Myth of God Incarnate*,<sup>6</sup> who argue for a sophisticated concept of 'myth', allow themselves also to say in a clearly pejorative sense that "'Orthodoxy" is a myth';<sup>7</sup> and it is difficult also not to feel that the title of the book is playing equivocally upon the popular connotations of the word). In scholarly usage the word has a wide range of possible meanings and nuances which, to oversimplify somewhat, one may perhaps divide into two broad areas. The first is that of a traditional narrative, usually featuring supernatural persons or activities, which embodies popular ideas and understandings of natural or social phenomena.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, in theological circles in particular, 'myth' often means a symbolic, poetic or imaginative story which is in no sense a literal, historical story. The distinctive feature in this theological usage is that 'myth' need be neither traditional nor popular, as in the more general definition; for neither epithet would be applicable to, say, the Johannine doctrine of the incarnation. The major emphasis is on the symbolic, non-literal nature of the material in question.

My purpose here is not to question or refine such uses of 'myth', but simply to focus upon one important corollary. This is that to call a story a myth, particularly in this latter sense, is essentially to make a literary and historical judgement. One is first making a literary judgement, to the effect that one is dealing with a piece of symbolic, imaginative writing; and secondly an historical judgement, that because the story belongs to such a literary category it is inappropriate to use it as an historical source of knowledge about the persons or events it relates. Its value to the historian resides rather in the light it sheds on the concepts and ideas of those who wrote it. The point I wish to make is that to call a story a myth in this sense is not to pass any judgement concerning its possible truth value. The concepts and ideas of the ancient writer may be true concepts and ideas. Thus, a myth may be true. Obviously, if one narrowly equates truth in a story with literal historicity, then the literary and historical assessment of a story as 'myth' does pass a negative judgement as to the truth content of the story, and one is left unable even to contemplate the possible truth of 'myth'. But while historicity is in general of great importance in the narrative portions of the Bible, and frequently affects assessments of its truth content, why should one narrowly equate truth with literal historicity? For a story which is 'true to life' or 'true to experience' can equally be said to be true. All too often modern

theological debate has been hampered by too narrow an understanding of truth.

Now it may appear that to say all this is simply to labour the obvious. Perhaps so. But I think that some of the practical implications are worth spelling out. As already seen, it is soteriology that can exercise a decisive impact on the form of one's incarnational Christology. And it has been the reinterpretation of a traditional picture of creation, fall and redemption, which has been felt to be increasingly untenable, that has significantly contributed to an abandonment of the traditional understanding of the incarnation which went with it. Why, however, has the traditional understanding of sin and salvation been felt to need reinterpretation? There is, of course, no single or simple answer to this, and an enormous number of factors is involved. Yet surely one major factor has been the designation of the first two key episodes in the sequence of creation–fall–redemption, as myths. This designation as 'myth' has usually carried two corollaries; first that the stories of creation and fall are not really true, and secondly that they are dispensable (in anything like their traditional form) in attempts to interpret the faith for today. But both of these corollaries should be questioned. To maintain that these stories are not true in a straightforward historical sense does not mean that one cannot maintain that they are true in another sense, in their portrayal of the nature of life. And if they are true in this sense, then not only are they not dispensable but also they should not be subjected to radical reinterpretation whereby, for example, the fall becomes a painful but necessary step in the path towards moral and spiritual awareness, rather than showing how disobedience to God has brought, and brings, pain and alienation into people's relationship with God and with one another.

The point of all this is to say that to call the traditional Christian picture of the fall 'mythical', may not in fact be to say very much for most practical purposes; certainly not to pass a value judgement on its truth content. And if the traditional picture, while containing myth, can nonetheless still be argued to be true, that should make one hesitant about discounting the traditional schema of salvation, including the incarnation, which goes with it.

Of course, all this still leaves much to be said. But if the basic point about the truth and indispensability of traditional myth can be accepted, it can lend an important nuance to one's discussion of the nature and meaning of the incarnation. And it can also provide an appropriate context in which to turn to the Old Testament and see what light it may be able to bring to bear.

How best, then, can one utilize the Old Testament in reflecting upon the incarnation? First, it is appropriate briefly to justify utilizing the Old Testament in this context at all, since, as von Rad put it, 'The



Old Testament never mentions Jesus Christ, nor does it visualize such a man as appears in the Gospels and Epistles.<sup>9</sup>

One's reason for using the Old Testament derives from the conviction that there is a real and fundamental continuity between the Old and New Testaments. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Sinai, is also the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This conviction is basic to the New Testament. And if it is the same God at work throughout, then one would expect the coming of Christ not to be entirely a bolt from the blue but rather to be preceded by adumbrations and preparations.

Of course there is also discontinuity between Old and New. The New Testament resounds with the conviction that God has done a new thing in Jesus. And even as Jesus fulfils the hopes of Israel, so he also transforms them, so that the Saviour and the salvation proclaimed by the New Testament are by no means what the predominant voices of the Old Testament would have led one to expect. But the way in which the New Testament transforms the expectations of the Old is not essentially different from the process of transformation already evident within the Old Testament itself.<sup>10</sup> The point, therefore, is that a real theological continuity, such as we find between the Testaments, is capable of containing development and diversity. This should encourage and not deter reflection upon Old Testament antecedents to the incarnation.

The problem is knowing how and where to start. For many centuries Christians, following the apparent lead of the New Testament, started by turning to certain individual verses or short passages which were thought to contain explicit predictions of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Such an approach is, for example, adopted in the most famous of all treatises on the incarnation, Athanasius' *De Incarnatione* (chs XXXIII–XL). The best known such text is Isaiah 7:14, which the AV renders 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.' The difficulty with such an approach is simple. It takes the words in question out of context—that is their literary and historical context within the Old Testament—and transfers them to a different context, that of Christian theological debate. Meaning, however, is largely determined by context. And while the Old Testament words are usually capable, in themselves, of bearing the meaning ascribed to them in the Christian theological debate, they would not, as a rule, bear that meaning when read in their original setting, where the context as a whole is directed towards other concerns. But despite this weakness of method, and despite the fact that it could sometimes utilize texts in a bizarre way, the approach should not be altogether despised. For it did tend to focus upon texts which are genuinely significant. A more theological approach, treating the same texts typologically (which is, arguably, the

approach of Matthew, who is the most obvious user of 'proof texts' in the New Testament), can produce not dissimilar results to the other method, even though obviously one's argument will need to be weighted differently.

As an example, I would like to consider Isaiah 9:2-7 (MT 9:1-6). This is an account of a Davidic king who is to bring a reign of justice and peace to Israel. The king is given some notable titles, traditionally rendered 'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace'. These are all titles appropriate to the Deity himself, and indeed the first two are specifically used of Yahweh elsewhere in the same book (Isa. 28:29; 10:21). Hence they were taken by some older commentators to point to a human king who would also be divine. And who else would this be other than God incarnate in Jesus?

The question, however, is whether the language in its historical context can genuinely bear this sort of meaning. The accepted modern interpretation runs along different lines.<sup>17</sup> The passage is seen as an oracle intended for the accession to the throne of one of Jerusalem's kings, probably Hezekiah in 725 BC. The king's titles, along with the whole picture of joy and peace, are an example of the extravagant language characteristic of traditional court-style; a style well attested in Egypt and adopted in Israel under the influence of Egyptian precedent and practice when the monarchy was established as a comparative latecomer and stranger in the history of Israel. The point of the titles is simply to describe the king as the legitimate representative of God upon earth. Any application to Jesus, therefore, could only be a secondary reinterpretation.

Now I have no wish to question the main lines of this interpretation, for it is well established. I do not think, however, that it says nearly enough, and commentators tend to break off at just the point where, once the ground has been cleared, the interpretation becomes interesting. For the interpretation just outlined says more about the history of the language than it does about its use and meaning within Isaiah. Yet, as already observed, it is context that determines meaning, and it is the context of ancient *Israel*, not Egypt or the ancient Near East generally, that must initially be determinative. A vital religious tradition and culture, such as that of Israel, is not some diffuse repository for miscellaneous beliefs and practices of other religions and cultures. Rather, because it has a coherence and identity of its own, it will only embrace those elements from outside which it perceives as congenial and able to help develop that which is already inherent within itself. And in so doing it will to a greater or lesser extent transform those elements it adopts.

So let me try to take the interpretation further. First, the nature and purpose of Isaiah 9:2-7 is thoroughly theological. The prophet has a vision of the one sovereign God, Lord of all the earth (cf. Isa.

6:3), and he is concerned with the salvation which God will bring about. A salvation worthy of the one sovereign God can involve no less than the total and radical transformation of Israel and her situation; hence the universal joy and peace.

Secondly, although the specific event of Hezekiah's accession may have occasioned the oracle, the oracle is clearly looking beyond the contingencies of the immediate situation to a situation that is ideal, a righteous king who will truly and fully administer God's rule over Israel. The validity of the ideal depends upon the extent to which it is in keeping with the character of Yahweh, and as such is independent of whether or not the king in question lives up to it, however much it is hoped that he will.

Thirdly, because the oracle is setting forward such an ideal, it contains a resolution of a theological problem within Israel, that is the role of the monarch and monarchy. For from early times there was often seen to be a conflict between theocracy and monarchy. This receives classic expression in the words of Gideon, when asked to be king: 'Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; Yahweh will rule over you"' (Judg. 8:23). The conflict is again expressed at the time of the institution of the monarchy under Samuel (1 Sam. 8, esp. v.7). Admittedly, the monarchy as such became acceptable when embodied in the house of David, on account of God's promises through Nathan (2 Sam. 7). But although this Davidic tradition was of great importance to Isaiah, the prophet was faced by the problem that the specific Davidic king with whom he had had dealings, that is Ahaz, was hardly a worthy occupant of his throne. The tension between the Davidic promise and the actual unworthy king seems to underlie the difficult sequence in Isaiah 7. It is this tension that is resolved in Isaiah 9:2-7. For while it is a picture of the peace that only God can bring (cf. v.7bβ), it is yet brought about through the Davidic king. A complete identity of will and purpose between Yahweh and his king is envisaged. And it is because God's rule is experienced in and through his king that epithets properly attributable only to God can be applied by extension to his king who truly mediates and represents God to his people. (One could thus say that the king truly fulfils the role envisaged for man over creation in Genesis 1:26.) In functional terms, though not of course ontological, there is a real identity between God and his king.

Within the Old Testament, no king achieved the ideal. It is not for nothing that the archetypal picture of distrust, leading to disobedience, leading to the alienation between God and man, is set at the outset of the Old Testament in Genesis 3. Hence the Christian looks to the New Testament presentation of Jesus as the only true fulfilment of the pictured harmony between God and his chosen king. For the New Testament presents Jesus as one whose practical obedience and

fidelity was entirely in accordance with his Father's will. One may also note that it is in the fourth gospel, which contains the most explicit statement of incarnation in the New Testament (John 1:14), an incarnation envisaged in ontological terms, that one finds an exposition of Jesus' sonship in the Hebraic terms of a practical unity whereby the doings of the son faithfully reflect the character, thought and action of the Father (John 10:32ff., esp. 36–38; cf. 5:19ff.). It is in this sort of way, one may suggest, that the concerns of the older 'predictive proof text' use of the Old Testament are best reappropriated through a broader and more theological handling of the same material.

An alternative approach to focusing upon specific well-known texts is to consider some of the larger theological concerns of the Old Testament—its understanding of God and man, of sin and salvation—and to ask in what way these might provide an appropriate context for a theology of incarnation. But, again, where does one start?

Since the incarnation is first and foremost a doctrine about God, one starting-point might be the human, or anthropomorphic, language about God which the Old Testament uses so constantly. For example, God is said to have eyes, ears, mouth, arms, hands, fingers, feet (Amos 9:4; 1 Sam. 8:21; Jer. 9:12; Isa. 52:10; Amos 9:2; Deut. 9:10; Isa. 60:13), and to do such things as stand, walk, laugh, be angry, smite, and have a change of heart (1 Sam. 3:10; Gen. 3:8; Ps. 2:4; Exod. 4:14; Ezek. 7:9; Gen. 6:6).

Such language has often been an embarrassment. Rabbinical schools already before the time of Jesus were arguing about the meaning of such anthropomorphisms, and the LXX shows a tendency towards spiritualizing reinterpretation. Philo of Alexandria, inheriting the Greek philosophical tradition of criticizing divine anthropomorphisms in Homer and Hesiod, was particularly open to the force of philosophical arguments against anthropomorphisms and provided a major reinterpretation of the Old Testament accordingly. And Philo in turn was a considerable influence on the early church fathers, especially the Alexandrians Clement and Origen. In more recent times, many inheritors of post-enlightenment thought have found Old Testament anthropomorphisms crude in the extreme. Their value has sometimes been thought to reside almost entirely in their evidential value for a history of primitive religion.

In contrast to such moves, however, one can argue that the anthropomorphisms are one of the strengths of the Old Testament, for they point to the *personality* of God. God is not remote, unfeeling or immovable. He fully cares for, and participates in, the history of the world he has made. As Ulrich Mauser comments,

If it is true to say that at the heart of the Christian confession lies the mystery of God's incarnation, anthropomorphic speech of God can well be understood as an ambassador of this mystery.<sup>12</sup>

Such a comment does not resolve the problems that anthropomorphisms raise. But whatever the philosophical difficulties that such language entails, and however much one should recognize that it is all ultimately metaphorical and not literal when applied to God, one can still reasonably maintain that it is the best language that we have. More abstract language will be ultimately no less metaphorical, and yet at the same time may be more, and not less, misleading.

Another striking feature of the Old Testament may also be of relevance here; that is its prohibition of images of the Deity. The aniconic demand may seem *prima facie* to be in some tension with the anthropomorphic presentation of God, and still more with any idea of incarnation. Nonetheless, I suggest that this is not so. For the aniconic demand can be seen as an attempt to safeguard the personal nature of Yahweh against sub-personal conceptions. While other ancient Near-Eastern religions did indeed have notable personal and anthropomorphic elements in their conceptions of their deities, their predominant tendency was to depict their gods in animal form. The bull was the most widespread symbol of deity in the ancient Near East, and the Israelites were constantly faced with the temptation to depict Yahweh in this easily acceptable and understood way; witness, most famously, the story of the golden calf (Exod. 32). The prohibition of images may be opposed to such animal depiction of God precisely because it is sub-personal. Insofar as Yahweh can be represented at all, it is only by man: see Genesis 1:26. The precise meaning of man as the image and likeness of God is open to debate, but it may be doubted whether any idea of man as an actual representation of God is involved. Rather, as D. J. A. Clines has argued,

That man is God's image means that he is the visible corporeal representative of the invisible, bodiless God: he is representative rather than representation, since the idea of portrayal is secondary in the significance of the image. However, the term 'likeness' is an assurance that man is an adequate and faithful representative of God on earth.<sup>13</sup>

Insofar as there is a being that can mediate God to the world, it is man.

One interesting passage in this regard is Exodus 34:29–35, the account of Moses descending from Sinai with shining face. This concludes the story of the golden calf and its aftermath, a story in which the problems raised by the prohibition of images are very much at the centre. The Israelites have attempted to depict God, or at least create a valid symbol or means of his presence, in the bull-calf (Exod. 32:1–6), and Moses himself has asked to see God (Exod. 33:18ff.). Two features about Moses' final descent stand out.<sup>14</sup> The first is its explicit contrast to a widespread ancient practice whereby a priest

wore a cultic mask to represent the deity when he spoke to people. Although Moses' veil has frequently been assimilated to this practice, the point in the text is clearly the precise opposite. It is the human face of Moses, and not a mask or representation, which is presented to the people, and it is through the human face of Moses that Yahweh's glory shines to the people. Secondly, an unusual word, which literally means 'to be horned', is used for the shining of Moses' face (hence Michelangelo's famous statue of a Moses with horns). This harks back to the golden calf, the false symbol of deity, the more so since in ancient cult the bull was frequently symbolized by its horn. The point seems to be that no literal horn (or bull) can represent God, but he can be represented and seen in the radiance that shines from the face of his faithful servant. One might almost say that in this story Moses is the human face of God.

If this interpretation of the prohibition of images as an attempt to safeguard the personality of God and to ensure that only the human can in any way represent God is along the right lines, then it provides an obviously fruitful field for theological reflection upon the propriety of God ultimately becoming man.

I would like to turn finally to consider the issue at hand from a different angle. Generalized statements about an appropriate theological context for the incarnation have an important place. But they can easily allow one to avoid asking more detailed and more awkward questions about the incarnation. So it is one such question that I would like to raise now: Why, given such an exalted doctrine of God and the role of man within the purposes of God as we have in the Old Testament, should the incarnation be necessary at all? Often in the Old Testament there is a religious depth which many a Christian can only look on in wonder from afar off. So the advocacy of something yet deeper may seem, in the literal sense of the term, impertinent. Why could not Jesus be simply another Moses? Why must he needs be so much greater?

This sort of question is extremely difficult to answer. Yet at least two things can be said, under the general headings of sin and of salvation. First, despite the exalted achievements of Moses, not least in Exodus 32–34, the Old Testament makes clear that on at least one important occasion in his career, he sinned (Num. 20:2–13). The occasion of his sin is not dwelt on, and indeed the story is told with a brevity that leaves it somewhat obscure as to what exactly was involved and why it was so serious. But the clear point seems to be that at a crucial moment there was a failure in faithfulness towards God. Even this exceptional man was not able to realize the full potential of what man under God could be. So one turns to Jesus, of whom the New Testament says that he did lead a life of unbroken faithfulness and obedience to God. In Jesus, who knows God as his Father, the full potential of man is realized. One can compare the

comments above about Jesus fulfilling Isaiah 9:2-7. The doctrine of the sinlessness of Jesus, when set in this light, is thus of major importance to New Testament Christology. (Perhaps if one rephrased the wording so as to talk of the complete faithfulness of Jesus, it would present less of a stumbling-block to some.)

Secondly, we return to the question of soteriology. What is the nature and content of salvation? No one would question the religious depth of the Old Testament, and the profound knowledge of God that it depicts in the lives of its saints. Nonetheless, one of the central and unmistakable claims of the New Testament is that in Jesus a salvation is available which most emphatically surpasses what was possible before. Now this is not the place to explore the nature of salvation in the New Testament and how and why it centres on the death and resurrection of Jesus. The fact that the claim is there is at present sufficient. But it will be relevant to consider one particularly apposite exposition of this theme, and that is 2 Corinthians 3:7-18 (Paul's treatment of the story of Moses and his shining face), which is used to illustrate a more generalized contrast between Old and New.

I confess, from my Old Testament perspective, to feeling a certain initial irritation with Paul's treatment. For he simply does not do justice to the central concerns of the story as outlined above. On the contrary, he fixes on a detail, the fading nature of Moses' splendour, which at best is only implicit in the story, and in fact in the form that he uses it is clearly indebted to subsequent midrashic development. But then I wonder whether this may not in fact be deliberate. That is, Paul fixes on the passage precisely because it is one of the most exalted depictions of man's access to God in the whole Old Testament. The fact that it was an occasion of glory is stressed (vv.7,9,10,11). But Paul's overwhelming conviction is that this is as nothing compared to the knowledge of God possible through Christ and the Spirit. Therefore, adopting the imaginative reflection upon a story that Midrash represents, Paul retells the story in such a way as to make his point clear. And whether or not this is valid depends less on whether his retelling is in keeping with the original purpose of the story than on whether the conviction that prompts the retelling is correct.

One is thus brought back to the fact of the New Testament claim to surpass the Old and to make complete what the Old left incomplete. The New Testament does not do this by appealing to a doctrine of incarnation as such, for explicit references are few. The appeal is rather to the death and resurrection of Jesus as salvific, and the incarnation appears to be a corollary of this. From an Old Testament perspective, therefore, the vital question is how and why the death and resurrection of Jesus make God accessible to man in a way that surpasses what was possible before. It is upon this conviction of a greater salvation that all depends. For the logic of a greater salvation

seems to demand some greater action than before to initiate it. Both a deeper work of God and a greater than Moses would be necessary to surpass that which went before. It could not be said that such a requirement necessarily entails an incarnation and atonement. But it can be said that the incarnation and atonement together do meet the requirement singularly well.

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## NOTES

- 1 I have not thought it necessary to provide comprehensive footnotes and bibliography for a piece of general theological reflection such as this. But sufficient references are given to enable those unfamiliar with the field to make the acquaintance of certain basic works.
- 2 I am grateful to Dr Frances Young, who read a draft version of this lecture and made numerous constructive suggestions.
- 2 See, for example, the discussions and works cited in A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Paternoster Press, Exeter 1980), esp. part two.
- 3 R. C. Gregg and D. E. Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* (SCM Press, London 1981).
- 4 G. W. Lampe, *God as Spirit* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1977).
- 5 *ibid.*, pp.14, 15, 23-4.
- 6 J. Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (SCM Press, London 1977).
- 7 *ibid.*, p.x.
- 8 See, for example, G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (CUP, London 1970).
- 9 G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. II (ET from German, SCM Press, London 1965), p.319.
- 10 *cf. ibid.*, pp.319-35.
- 11 There is, of course, considerable continuing debate about the interpretation of the passage, but the basic point at issue here is not affected. For a recent survey of the debate, see M. E. W. Thompson, 'Isaiah's Ideal King', *JSOT*, 24, 1982, pp.79-88. For a concise statement of the position outlined here, see R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids/Marshall Morgan & Scott, London 1980), pp.103-9.
- 12 U. Mauser, 'Image of God and Incarnation', *Interpretation*, 24, 1970, p.343.
- 13 D. J. A. Clines, 'The Image of God in Man', *Tyndale Bulletin*, 19, 1968, p.101.
- 14 For a fuller exposition and justification of the following interpretation, see my *At the Mountain of God: Story and Theology in Exodus 32-34* (JSOT Press, Sheffield 1983).