

## Chapter 15

# DID GOD BECOME A JEW? A DEFENSE OF THE INCARNATION

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The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14)—this Word that not only was “with God” but “was God” (John 1:1).<sup>1</sup> The self-existent triune God created a good world, but His creatures turned away and became exiled and alienated from Him. But this was not the last word on the matter. God comes to us and communicates Himself to us through the Word, Jesus of Nazareth, to restore His creation and to form a new chosen people through Him. He is the second Adam and the beloved Son and the true Israel, which national Israel had failed to be. According to orthodox Christian doctrine, God became human—a first-century Jew—to restore His people and, indeed, all humanity to Himself.

The historic Christian faith has maintained that *two natures*, divine and human, exist fully in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; He is “perfect God, perfect man subsisting of a reasoning soul and human flesh,” as the Athanasian Creed (c. AD 500) states it. The Chalcedonian Creed (AD 481) affirms that

our Lord Jesus Christ [was and is] at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.

same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin . . . recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union.

As they do with the doctrine of the Trinity, liberal theologians, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others assert that this God-in-flesh doctrine is incoherent. The all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good God is so utterly unlike humans, who are ignorant, frail, and flawed. The philosopher of religion and religious pluralist John Hick claims that Jesus of Nazareth, though "intensely conscious of God's holy and loving presence," was "wholly human." Eventually, the "Jesus cult" developed into the "cult of the risen Christ, transfigured and deified."<sup>2</sup> Jesus scholar Marcus Borg maintains that Jesus *couldn't* have said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6) or "I am the Light of the world" (John 8:12); psychologically sane people don't say such things.<sup>3</sup> Of course, the question remains: If early Christians put these words into Jesus' mouth, why would they make up an embarrassing, psychologically challenged Jesus? Borg's argument only postpones the question.

Is it absurd to affirm the incarnation? As with the doctrine of the Trinity, the incarnation is a mystery whose power and majesty cannot be reduced to a set of truth statements or formulas. The mystery of godliness is indeed great (1 Tim 3:16), but this does not mean the incarnation is irrational or illogical. In the spirit of Christian philosopher Thomas Morris's book *The Logic of God Incarnate*,<sup>4</sup> this essay will attempt to show that the incarnation, though a mystery, is a *coherent* one. I shall (1) briefly review the scriptural affirmations of Jesus' humanity and divinity, (2) highlight three important distinctions to help us understand the incarnation, and (3) examine the question of Jesus' temptation in light of His divinity.

<sup>2</sup> J. Hick, *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm* (Oxford: One World, 1999), 234–36.

<sup>3</sup> In M. J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1999), 149.

<sup>4</sup> T. V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986; rpt. Wipf and Stock, 2002).

## The Scriptures on Jesus' Humanity and Divinity

The Bible resoundingly affirms the *humanity* of Jesus. Second- and third-century Gnostic heresies—reflected in later noncanonical gospels such as *Thomas* and *Judas*—rejected the goodness of the physical creation, downplayed earthly history in favor of eternal truths and spiritual enlightenment; they denigrated the material body while exalting an immaterial soul. The Gnostic pseudogospels portray an otherworldly “Christ.” By contrast the earlier, canonical Gospels present Jesus as fully *human*. Jesus is the Word become flesh (John 1:14). He is the “man” by whom came the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor 15:21). He is also the “second Adam” (1 Cor 15:45). This “man” is the “mediator between God and man” (1 Tim 2:5 HCSB) who is “revealed in the flesh” (1 Tim. 3:16) and who suffered and died on the cross (1 John 5:8).

What of Jesus' *divinity*? University of Edinburgh's Larry Hurtado argues that, contrary to all expectation, belief in Jesus' deity emerged as “a veritable ‘big bang,’ an explosively rapid and impressively substantial development in the earliest stage of the Christian movement.”<sup>5</sup> What is the biblical evidence for His divinity?

Philippians 2:6–11, an early Christian hymn, provides strong evidence not only for the preexistence of the Son of God<sup>6</sup> but also for Jesus' equality with God the Father.

[He], although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

<sup>5</sup> L. W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 135.

<sup>6</sup> For a defense of the Son of God's preexistence (against positions taken by biblical scholars such as James D. G. Dunn), see D. McCready, *He Came Down from Heaven: The Preexistence of Christ and the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL/Leicester, UK: InterVarsity/Apollos, 2006).

and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:6–11)

Further support for Jesus' divinity comes from key Old Testament references to Yahweh ("the LORD") that are used to refer to Jesus "the Lord" in the New Testament:

- every knee will bow to *Yahweh* (Isa 45:23; to *Jesus* in Phil. 2:10);
- to call on the name of *Yahweh* brings salvation (Joel 2:31–32; cf. the name of *Jesus* in Acts 2:20–21; Rom 10:13);
- a forerunner prepares the way for *Yahweh* (Isa 40:3; for *Jesus* in Matt 3:3);
- *Yahweh* is my shepherd (Ps 23:1; the shepherd is *Jesus* in John 10:11);
- Isaiah sees *Yahweh's* glory (Isa 6:1–5,10; *Jesus's* glory in John 12:41);
- *Yahweh* is the first and the last (Isa 44:6; 48:12; 51:12; the first and last is *Jesus* in Rev 1:17; 2:8; 22:13).

In addition, Jesus takes on divine prerogatives; that is, He assumes the role and authority typically taken by Yahweh. He *forgives sin*, not only displacing the temple but assuming God's authoritative domain (Mark 2:5,7). He's the *judge* of the world (Matt 25:31–46; cf. 2 Cor 5:10). He is *prayed to* (Acts 7:59–60; 1 Cor 16:22; 2 Cor 12:9) and He receives worship (John 20:28, where He is called "My Lord and my God!"). He calls Himself the "Son of Man"—the exalted figure of Daniel 7 who shares authority with the Ancient of Days (Mark 14:62). He is explicitly called "God" (John 1:1,18; 20:28; Acts 20:28; Rom 9:5; Titus 2:13; Heb 1:8; 2 Pet 1:1; 1 John 5:20). A helpful acrostic that summarizes the various aspects of Jesus' deity is *H-A-N-D-S*: Jesus shares in the *Honors* due to God, the *Attributes* of God, the *Names* of God, the *Deeds* of God, and the *Seat* of God's throne.<sup>7</sup>

We're familiar with the trilemma popularized by C. S. Lewis. Jesus is not merely a "good moral teacher" (as merely good moral teachers don't make such "outrageous" identity claims as having all authority

<sup>7</sup> Taken from E. Komoszewski and R. Bowman Jr., *Putting Jesus in His Place* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007).

or being the final judge of all humanity): Jesus was either a liar, a lunatic, or Lord of all. There is another alternative, however—legend. But Lewis was well aware of this possibility, and it was one he readily dismissed. He knew about miracle-denying New Testament critics, even theologians, who considered the incarnation to be a myth or legend, a human fabrication. Lewis was capable of distinguishing between legend and history, and he wrote of these scholars: “I distrust them as critics. They seem to me to lack literary judgment, to be imperceptive about the quality of the texts they are reading.” Though studying the New Testament from their youth up, they lack the needed literary experience and so miss “the obvious things” about these texts: “If [the critic] tells me that something in a Gospel is legend or romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he has read, how well his palate is trained in detecting them by flavour; not how many years he has spent on that Gospel.”<sup>8</sup> As Lewis affirms, Jesus’ miracles and authoritative identity-claims in the Gospels are reliably recorded history; they are not the stuff of legends. Indeed, the notion that Jesus’ death and resurrection are copycat beliefs from existing pagan dying-and-rising god myths from the Mediterranean world is simply implausible. As N. T. Wright asserts, efforts to find parallels between Christianity and these mystery religions “have failed, as virtually all Pauline scholars now recognize,” and to do so “is an attempt to turn the clock back in a way now forbidden by the most massive and learned studies on the subject.”<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, while disputes had broken out in the earliest Christian communities over circumcision, spiritual gifts, or the place of the Mosaic Law, *no* disagreement exists in the New Testament writings regarding Jesus’ lofty status as Lord of all. The fiercely monotheistic Jew, Paul, writing an early Christian creed (early AD 50s), Christianizes the *Shema* (“Hear, O Israel”) of Deut 6:4–6, declaring Jesus is the one “Lord” of Israel and the Creator of all—“by whom are all things, and

<sup>8</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Fern-Seed and Elephants,” in *Fern-Seed and Elephants and Other Essays on Christianity*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Collins, 1975), 106–7.

<sup>9</sup> N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 172–73. For a recent, comprehensive critique of the Jesus-legend argument, see P. R. Eddy and G. A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

we exist through Him” (1 Cor 8:6). Jesus shares in the divine identity. The Hebrew Bible anticipates that Yahweh will come to Zion, defeat evil, and restore His people, gathering the scattered exiles into a new, redeemed community; and the early Christians affirm that this happened in the Christ event; Yahweh’s kingdom breaks in by the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

### **The Incarnation: Three Important Distinctions**

Having reviewed some of the biblical evidence, I would like to explore what I find to be a fruitful, reasonable, and biblically rooted model that helps us make sense of God’s becoming man. Again, this is not an attempt to eliminate the incarnation’s mystery but to argue that it isn’t illogical. In unpacking this model, I want to make three distinctions.

1. *The distinction between nature and person.* A thing’s *nature* or *essence* makes it what it is; it wouldn’t exist if it lacked these features. We all have human-making features—the capacity to choose or act, to be conscious, to communicate, to feel, to hold beliefs—even if we aren’t presently using those capacities, say, when we’re asleep or comatose. God has characteristics that make him God. By *person*, we mean *a center of (self-)consciousness, will, activity, and responsibility*. Those who are persons include human and angelic individuals as well as the maximally great divine Persons within the Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit.

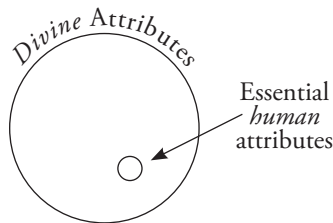
What then is the *relation* between *person* and *nature*? A person *has* a nature; you and I *possess* something that makes us what we are, the same human *nature*. Jesus of Nazareth, though *one* Person, is fully God and fully human. He uniquely possesses *two* natures—one identical to *our human nature* and the other nature *divine*.

2. *The distinction between what is “fully” (essentially) human and what is “merely” (commonly) human.* Humans commonly have arms, legs, hair, and eyes; but even without these we can still be fully human. Also, humans commonly, even universally, commit moral wrongs; but despite Alexander Pope’s statement, “To err is human,” sinning isn’t essential to being human. After all, Adam and Eve were created sinless;

Jesus was sinless; and in the afterlife believers will be sinless as well. Death, too, though common, doesn't define or partly define human beings. Enoch (Gen 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kgs 2:11) didn't die even though death has touched all other human beings. You get the idea.

This *essentially/fully* human and *commonly/merely* human distinction reminds us that certain human features we assume to be *essential* (part of our nature) often aren't essential after all; they may just be *common*. This distinction can help us see that a divine-human incarnation is possible: *what is essential to human nature doesn't exclude the possibility of being fully divine*. The *image of God* figures into our discussion at this point: human beings were made "a little lower than God" (Ps 8:5) to co-rule creation and to commune with God (Gen 1:26–27). Christ Himself, the new Adam, *is* the image of God (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15). As our representative, He both fulfills the human vocation in reflecting God's image and also graciously empowers us to live as humans were intended to live.

In *limited form* we share in certain attributes or properties with God—personality, relationality, rationality, morality, freedom, creativity—that enable us to fulfill our vocation. Certain essential human characteristics are derived from divine characteristics: *human nature is thus a subcategory of the divine*.



So the divine-human union in Jesus of Nazareth becomes possible. Biblical scholar F. F. Bruce puts it well: "It is because man in the creative order bears the image of his Creator that it was possible for the Son of God to become incarnate as man and in His humanity to display the glory of the invisible God."<sup>10</sup> According to one theologian, "If human beings are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen.

<sup>10</sup> E. K. Simpson and F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of Paul to the Ephesians and to the Colossians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 194.

1:26–7), there must be something divine about every human being. If, and this is our case, the divine Logos could assume a humanity, there must be something human about God.”<sup>11</sup> Even though the essentially human and the divine are poles apart in terms of greatness, *they aren't necessarily mutually exclusive*. Though we are *limited* or *finite* in ourselves, finitude *doesn't define us as human*: Jesus aside, this *common/universal* human characteristic isn't a *necessary* one.<sup>12</sup>

3. *The distinction between Jesus' two consciousnesses or levels of awareness—His developing first-century Jewish, human consciousness and the eternal, divine consciousness*. Imagine a spy on a dangerous mission, carrying in his mind top-secret information valuable to the enemy. To avoid divulging answers in case he's caught and tortured, he takes along a limited-amnesia producing pill with an antidote for later use. If the spy uses the amnesia pill, he would *still* possess the vital information in his mind; given these temporary conditions required to carry out his mission, he chooses to limit his access to the information that's stored up in his mind.

Similarly, during Jesus' mission to earth, He *still possessed* the full, undiminished capacities of divine knowledge and power, and He had access to those capacities as necessary for His mission. But before the foundation of the world, Father, Son, and Spirit freely determined together that the Son would limit or restrain the use of those powers to accomplish His overall mission (John 17:5,22–26). So (1) Jesus gave up having access to knowing, say, the time of His return (Matt 24:36) and, as we'll see, knowing that it was impossible for Him to sin or to be vulnerable to temptation (cf. Jas 1:13). However, (2) He didn't *lose* essential divine attributes; rather, He *voluntarily, temporarily suppressed* or *gave up access to* using certain divine capacities and powers He possessed all along. Like a father holding back the full force of his powers

<sup>11</sup> G. O'Collins, *Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 233.

<sup>12</sup> If humans are *created* or *finite*, did Jesus become a creature? No, He *took on* human nature and a human body. While both *are* God's creations, this doesn't mean that they are *necessary* to being human. Are humans *necessarily* finite? We can deny that both *creaturehood* and *being finite* are *necessary* or *essential* characteristics of human beings since God couldn't become something contrary to His nature. T. Senor, "The Incarnation and the Trinity," in *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. Michael J. Murray (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 247. I am also borrowing here from Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate*.



while playing soccer or baseball with his kids, so the Son of God, before coming to earth, determined to *restrain* His divine capacities.<sup>13</sup>

To illustrate how we can coherently talk about two levels of awareness, consider what it's like to come out of a dream in which we're *simultaneously* still dreaming *but also* conscious that it's a dream, at once "within" the dream and "outside" it. Or think of the two levels of awareness involved in self-deception: a person knows what's right but convinces himself to suppress his conscience. These examples of two levels of awareness—not two egos or selves, however—working together or overlapping in one person can perhaps give us some idea of the workings of the incarnate Christ's mind.

We can usefully compare Jesus' *two levels of awareness* ("minds") with *our* two levels of awareness—the *subconscious* and *conscious*: Jesus' *human* awareness can be likened to our *conscious*, and His *divine* awareness is analogous to our *subconscious*. When God the Son took on human form, *His fully aware eternal, His divine consciousness, His (comm) union with Father and Spirit, and His sustenance of the universe didn't cease but rather continued uninterrupted*. Yet in His limited, developing human consciousness, Jesus grew and developed with an earthly, first-century, Aramaic-speaking, Jewish awareness of the world. Reading the Scriptures, He saw with increasing clarity His messianic status. He struggled, experienced the range of human emotions, and deepened in obedience and submission to His Father's will (cf. Luke 2:52; Heb 2:18; 5:8).<sup>14</sup>

Jesus' human consciousness *significantly interacted* with His divine consciousness and wasn't cut off from certain heavenly illuminations like the glow of divine light that streams through a cloth curtain.<sup>15</sup> Jesus, however, *didn't regularly rely on His divine consciousness* while on earth but primarily operated in His human consciousness, just like us, with the added depth of divine awareness. Being fully human, Jesus

<sup>13</sup> G. Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 218.

<sup>14</sup> R. T. France, "The Uniqueness of Jesus," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 17 (Jan. 1993): 13.

<sup>15</sup> G. Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power*, 212, 216. R. L. Reymond writes: "There is no confusion [in the crucifixion] of the divine and human natures of Christ. It is not the divine nature as such which is crucified; it is the divine person, because he is also human, who is crucified." "Incarnation" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W. A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 556–57.

freely and fully depended on the Spirit's power as He sought to carry out His Father's purpose.

These three distinctions provide a helpful framework for addressing questions such as: (1) If Jesus was God, who was running the universe when He was a baby or on the cross? (2) How could God die? (3) If God "so loved the world," why did He send His Son rather than come Himself? This two-levels-of-awareness incarnational model helps us see that Jesus experienced the ongoing mutually indwelling trinitarian life, still governing the universe as a baby while dying on the cross. And He died as a mere, not essentially, human being; the divine nature wasn't crucified but the divine person, who is also human.<sup>16</sup> The mutual life of the Trinity suggests that each divine person experienced pain at the crucifixion; Jesus didn't suffer alone. Rather, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor 5:19).

### **If Jesus Was God, How Could He Be Tempted?**

In the incarnation God comes close to us; He comes alongside us in our weakness, even enduring difficult temptations and struggles: "We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15).

The natural follow-up question to our discussion is, *If Jesus was God, how could He be tempted?* Because of God's intrinsic goodness (Jas 1:18), He can't be led into sin or overpowered by an outside force: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone" (Jas 1:13). But wasn't the incarnate Christ tempted to depart from His Father's will, to take the easy way out (Matt 4:1–11)? Doesn't His temptation mean He can "come to the aid of those who are tempted" (Heb 2:18)? But doesn't this imply Jesus *could have* sinned? And if *not*, then wasn't His temptation simply playacting? As we'll see, the Bible portrays Jesus' temptations as a genuine anguished struggle; there is no playacting involved here. Let's explore further.

<sup>16</sup> R. L. Reymond, "Incarnation" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 556–57. Cf. Acts 20:28: "The church of God which He purchased with His own blood."

*First, the “merely/commonly” versus “fully/essentially” human distinction reminds us that the ability to sin isn’t part of the definition of “human.”* The impossibility of humans’ sinning in the new heaven and earth won’t diminish their full humanity. Though common among human beings, the ability to sin isn’t essential to our humanity. For Jesus to be fully human, He didn’t need to have the ability to sin.

*Second, for His redemptive mission on earth, the Son of God voluntarily set aside having access to knowing certain things; one such item was the awareness that He couldn’t sin.* The Gospels portray Jesus’ supernatural knowledge of people’s thoughts and details about future events. But Jesus is also ignorant of certain things such as the timing of His return (*parousia*, lit. “presence”): “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone” (Matt 24:36). We could also add Jesus’ ignorance about the fig tree (Mark 11:13) and the hemorrhaging woman who touched him (Mark 5:30–33) or His amazement at a Gentile centurion’s faith (Matt 8:10).

Likewise, Jesus’ mission included intentionally surrendering the knowledge that *He, being divine, couldn’t ultimately deviate from His Father’s will.* In Gethsemane He prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will” (Matt 26:39). Theologian Gerald O’Collins asserts that Jesus’ growth in self-knowledge and self-identity and in struggling in prayer “supports the conclusion that the divine reality was not fully and comprehensively present to the [human] mind of Jesus.”<sup>17</sup>

For temptation to be meaningful, Jesus, unable to sin, must have been unaware that sinning was impossible. *Jesus was unaware of the time of His own return so why not of the impossibility of sinning?* In His preincarnate state, the Son of God (with Father and Spirit) determined to give up temporary access to being aware of *both* of these things as part of His mission. He voluntarily limited access to expressing certain divine attributes (in being weak, hungry, and tired)—as well as having access to His divine knowledge (ignorance of His second coming and His invulnerability to sin), though He at any time could have chosen to be aware of them. Jesus thus identifies with us by experiencing *real*

<sup>17</sup> G. O’Collins, *Interpreting Jesus* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist, 1983), 186.

temptations and limitations. If Jesus' human awareness saw the divine reality in all its clarity, being obedient, struggling in prayer, He could not have experienced true temptation.<sup>18</sup>

The incarnate Son's temptations *were* real; acting on them seemed a genuine possibility to Him. Though *unique*, His situation is *conceivable*: Imagine entering a room and closing the door behind you. Unbeknownst to you, the door has an automatic two-hour time lock. You consider leaving once or twice, but you freely decide to read for the full two hours, after which you leave the room. Would you have been able to leave earlier? No. But why did you *stay* in and *not try* to go out? Because you *freely decided* to stay. Similarly, Christ freely chose, in submission to the Spirit, to resist temptation even though it was impossible for Him to sin; however, His divine awareness didn't overwhelm or impose itself on His human awareness.<sup>19</sup>

Jesus could be truly tempted and tested, provided that he did not know that he could not sin. If he had known that he could not sin, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to make sense of genuine temptations; they would be reduced to make-believe, a performance put on for the edification of others. It was quite a different situation to be incapable of sin and not to know that.<sup>20</sup>

But if Jesus knew He stood in God's place as the great "I am" (John's Gospel) or the final judge (Matt 7:23), how could He *not* know sinning was impossible? The simple answer is that, though standing in God's place, He, as part of His mission, *was* ignorant about His return *and* other matters.

Rather than playacting, Christ suffered real temptation because He gave up temporary access to the knowledge that He couldn't sin. Through moment-by-moment submission to His Father's will and His being "led by the Spirit" (Luke 4:1 HCSB), He also sets an example for us to be "led by the Spirit" (Rom 8:14). Some Christians think, *Of course, Jesus didn't sin; He was God!* Yet His overcoming temptation wasn't automatic because He was divine but because He steadfastly

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>19</sup> Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate*, 149–50.

<sup>20</sup> O'Collins, *Christology*, 271.

committed Himself to His Father's will and relied on the empowering Spirit.

Though an amazing *mystery*, the doctrine of the incarnation isn't a *contradiction*. In this mystery a fully divine, fully human Jesus possesses a certain dual awareness. In one, He is fully knowing; in another He is voluntarily limited in His knowledge so that He could *truly* endure temptation, identifying with us in every way except without sin.

### Final Considerations

The incarnation of Christ serves as a caution to us: we must begin with Scripture rather than with some (perhaps) Greek philosophical abstractions about a generic "Unmoved Mover" or "First Cause"; otherwise, we may run the risk of beginning with a deity that more closely resembles that of Greek philosophy or Enlightenment Deism than the Triune God of the Christian faith. Even though there is a rightful place for arguments for God's existence, the discussion must move beyond this point to asking the personalizing question: "If some good, wise, powerful Creator exists, has He made Himself more clearly known, and, if so, how should I respond to Him?" The Scriptures emphatically state that God has revealed Himself in Jesus of Nazareth. This God is not necessarily the kind of God that, say, Plato or Aristotle would expect. Rather, Jesus shows up on the scene doing the sorts of things Yahweh is supposed to do—manifesting the presence of Yahweh, bringing forgiveness and deliverance from exile, and so forth. He does something unexpected, even though the Old Testament anticipates it: He stoops exceedingly low to identify with us and to rescue us, and in doing so He displays His greatness. Jesus of Nazareth, who said that the one who sees Him sees the Father (John 14:9), invites us to look to Him to see just what kind of God Yahweh is. Jesus' incarnation and crucifixion are profound indicators of what God is like.<sup>21</sup>

Earlier we looked at the Christ-hymn in Philippians 2, where Paul draws on Isa 45:22–23; 52:13; 53; 57:15—passages that stress how

<sup>21</sup> See N. T. Wright, "The Truth of the Gospel and Christian Living," in *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, M. Borg and N. T. Wright (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999), 214–15; see also chapter 5 in N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

God, though high and lofty and worship-worthy, dwells with the contrite and lowly in spirit. Here I should mention the *kenosis* theory or “kenotic Christology” (from the Greek word *kenōō* “empty” in Phil 2:7, where God the Son “emptied Himself [*auton ekenōsen*]”). This view generally emphasizes the Son of God’s temporarily surrendering certain divine attributes such as omniscience or omnipotence between the virginal conception and the resurrection (although since the incarnation, God the Son remains incarnate forever).<sup>22</sup> However, I believe that we have embedded in the Old Testament itself themes of God’s “self-emptying” or self-humiliation coupled with His exalted status. These themes are brought together and cohere remarkably in the New, particularly in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. In this Christological hymn Paul is saying that the career of the Servant of the Lord—including His suffering, humiliation, death, and exaltation—is the manner in which the sovereignty of the one true God becomes evident to the world. It is precisely in the Servant’s humiliation that God’s greatness is most clearly revealed to the nations. In contrast to the kenotic theory, Yahweh is humble in His nature. This humility is not simply manifested in the Son of God’s self-emptying, but, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>23</sup> it is characteristic of God even apart from Jesus’ earthly career.

Having said this, I want to discuss briefly how the New Testament expands on the twin themes of God’s humility and exalted status. In John’s Gospel, the words and themes of humiliation/suffering and exaltation are actually aligned closely: the Servant of Yahweh is exalted and glorified *in* and *through* His humiliation and suffering. John refers back to the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament [LXX]) of the Suffering Servant passage in Isa 52:13 (“Behold, My servant will prosper; He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted” [my translation]). The verbs “lifted up” [Greek verb: *hypsōō*] and “glorified/exalted” [Greek verb: *doxazō*] are brought together in John’s Gospel to refer to Jesus’ death on the cross. Note the following verses (my emphasis):

<sup>22</sup> On some of the issues surrounding kenotic Christology, see C. S. Evans, ed., *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> P. Copan, “Divine Narcissism? A Further Defense of God’s Humility,” *Philosophia Christi* n.s. 8 (January 2006): 313–25.

As Moses *lifted up* the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be *lifted up*. (John 3:14)

Jesus said, “When you *lift up* the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me.” (John 8:28)

And Jesus answered them, saying, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be *glorified*. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:23–24)

“And I, if I am *lifted up* from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.” But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die. (John 12:32–33)

Therefore when [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man *glorified*, and God is glorified in Him; if God is glorified in Him, God will also *glorify* Him in Himself, and will *glorify* Him immediately.” (John 13:31–32)

John is using a double meaning of the verb “lift up”: it is being used both literally (the crucifixion elevated one above the earth [cf. 12:33]) and figuratively: in the humiliation of the crucifixion, we note Jesus’ simultaneous elevation to the status of divine sovereignty over the cosmos. The cross is *already* Jesus’ exaltation or glorification.<sup>24</sup> So in the incarnation of Christ—particularly the shameful, humiliating crucifixion—we see God’s greatest achievement, His supreme moment of glory: God is willing to descend to humiliating death (being physically lifted up on the cross) to display unsurpassable greatness (being spiritually lifted up, being glorified).

In the incarnation, the God-man becomes the perfect Mediator between humankind and God. Indeed, the essence of sin is humans attempting to take the place of God whereas the essence of salvation is God taking the place of man.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> For further elaborations on these themes, see R. Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> J. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 160.