

INCARNATION: A JEWISH RESPONSE

Classic Judaism rejects the idea of divine incarnation. Historically speaking, the theological doctrine that Jesus is God led to the charges of deicide against Jews, resulting in much pain and devastation to my people. Today, however, a true Jewish-Christian relationship can be developed without compromising core religious doctrines. It is precisely the Christians' positive support of the Jewish people and Israel that allows for topics that were off limits to be discussed freely.

Judaism does not believe that God will or can ever be represented in His totality in a physical form. We recognize that human beings are created in the image of God, are united with the Almighty, and understand that God is ever present in the nation of Israel. However, Christianity's claim that Jesus is God is not within the pale of Jewish thought.

Jews might wish to inquire what it means for a Christian to say that the incarnation took place. I am not suggesting Jews start believing in the Christian concept. However, Judaism can learn to appreciate the spiritual truths of the "other" without having to agree with them.

Christianity teaches that the supreme expression of God's love and care was His self-sacrifice to save humanity from sin. This explains the Christian feeling that in Jesus he or she encounters God Himself, and not simply a sage or prophet. Yet the concept is not foreign in mainstream Judaism. If we can separate the Christian dogma from its dogmatic content and isolate its basic religious sense, Jews and Christians have many more things in common religiously than what may traditionally be meant by Judeo-Christian beliefs.

Incarnation is a process whereby some disincarnate reality takes a bodily manifestation. The most obvious case might be that of body and soul. If one believes in the preexistence of the soul, then any physical birth is an act of incarnation. This type of incarnation is naturally recognized within Judaism. Jews believe the Torah ("the Word") was created before the world, and was used as a blueprint to form the universe in which we live. The physical scroll itself can thus legitimately be viewed as a form of incarnation. In fact, when a Torah scroll is damaged beyond use, it is buried just like a human body. To avoid Christian overtones, Judaism never describes the transformation of the soul and the Torah in incarnational terms. However, if we think of the idea that the Torah is an incarnating presence, we have a better understanding of that which Christianity attributes to Jesus, which is similar to what Judaism assigns to the Torah.

Even the nation of Israel is an incarnational process; fulfilling a divine plan for the world. It is not common to speak of the incarnation of Israel, but the “dry bones” mentioned in Ezekiel 37 is just that. Israel is an incarnation of the Divine will—a covenantal surrogate of God’s presence.

In the Gospel of John one finds the notion of the word becoming flesh—literally, “incarnation.” The assumption is that the body of Jesus, too, is divine. Incarnation in this context encompasses a fuller sense of the human person, who is said to be not only divine but truly God. If the logos has been made into flesh, then Jesus’ body is subject to religious worship. This is where Judaism draws the line; it says the body can clothe divinity, but can never become divine.

The Christian can point to Jesus and, with all the power of this idea, say, Ecce Deus. The Jew will say that the person is proto-divine, but would never declare an individual human God.

While this doctrine of incarnation is currently at the heart of the Jewish-Christian differences, it by no means reduces our shared conception of God, Who loves, is humble, and Who is ever-present in the world. A Jew can thus appreciate the spiritual reality of the Christian; in it, he hears an echo of God’s voice.

The INCARNATION: A Hebrew Concept

It has long been observed that “Christianity is the only religion in history to consider another religion, Judaism, to be wholly true.” Christianity professes to believe in the Hebrew Scriptures as the authentic message from God. In fact, in the last two millennia Christendom has been responsible for the publication of far more Hebrew Scriptures than the Jews themselves. Yet a statement like this seems totally surprising in light of the historical, often violent conflict of traditional, institutional, imperial Christendom against Judaism. How then can the initial statement above remain absolutely true? The basis for justifying it is first of all to make the observation that there is a radical difference between Biblical Christianity and “Imperial Christendom.” Biblical Christianity really believes in the Hebrew Scriptures whereas traditional, and I might add hypocritical, Christendom has only paid lip service to the fact.

The New Testament record tells us the first Christians were totally Jewish, and they emphatically and enthusiastically celebrated the Law of Moses. Thus, original Christianity received from Judaism the Hebrew Bible and they saw absolutely no conflict between the Scriptures of the prophets and their faith in Jesus Christ as the Divine Son of God. Indeed, they saw the teaching of the Incarnation (God sometimes appearing in human form) as a Hebrew concept, clearly taught in their own Scriptures.

Obviously, we know from the same New Testament there was an immediate conflict with the majority of the Jewish nation at that time because they did not profess to see this teaching about God being incarnate. The majority of the Jewish leaders of that first century considered this doctrine heresy of the worst kind.

Now in order to understand why there was this difference amongst the Jews, one must first of all be making a similar observation as we made above about Christendom. In other words, there very well may be as radical a difference between Biblical Judaism and apostate Judaism as there is between Biblical Christianity and apostate Christianity. Amazing as it may seem, Judaism and Christendom followed a similar course in their failure to maintain a proper allegiance to God. Israel experienced its Babylonian captivity and Christendom had the same experience. Church historians speak of the religious “Babylonian captivity” of the Church during the so-called Dark Ages.

Jewish teachers today all recognize, when they are on the subject of Jewish history, that the horrible desolation of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the Jewish nation in 70 C.E. came as a result of God’s displeasure with His own people because of their unbelief. They were in apostasy. In fact Rabbi Riskin, himself, has recently observed that—

Indeed the Bible prophesies two destructions and exiles—
one foretelling the destruction of the first Temple in 586 BCE
(Lev. 26:14), ‘*if they will not hearken unto Me,*’ and the
second dealing with the destruction of the second Temple in
70 CE and the second exile (Deut. 28:15), ‘*And it will happen
if they do not hearken to the voice of the Lord your God...*’
(Jerusalem Post, Oct. 30—Nov. 5, *Why Israel is God’s Chosen*)

In the very same article Rabbi Riskin further observed—

The message which emerges from this study should be clear and frightening. God loves and believes in Abraham's progeny, and there will always be a faithful remnant worthy of redemption.

Is it possible that the "faithful remnant" in 70 A.D. was the Jewish Christians of the first century?—after all, this expression about a "remnant" of believing Jews was used by another rabbi named Paul, who came to believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God (Romans 11:5)!

So, what then is the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures concerning the embodiment of God in human flesh?

Adam and Eve apparently believed in it! The Scripture says, "They heard the voice of the LORD God *WALKING IN THE GARDEN*...and the man and his wife went into hiding from *the FACE of the LORD God*..." (Gen.3:8). Now every sane and sensible person who reads this passage, and takes it at face value, must understand that God took a physical form in His communication with our grandparents. This is not blasphemy! This is what the Hebrew Scriptures clearly reveal.

Even Cain believed it! In conversation with God, the guilty Cain exclaimed, "And from *YOUR FACE* I shall be concealed...With that Cain went away from the *FACE of the LORD*" (Gen 4:9-16). This meant, that like his parents, Cain had experienced the immediate bodily (incarnate) presence of the LORD.

Abraham, very obviously, believed in it! "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, then the LORD *APPEARED* to Abram and said to him; 'I AM ALMIGHTY GOD. Walk before ME and prove yourself faultless'...At this Abram fell upon his face, and God (six more times 'God' speaks) continued to speak with him...With that, God finished speaking with him and *WENT UP FROM* Abraham" (Gen. 17:1, 3, 22). This obviously means that there was a physical appearance (incarnation) of God to Abraham. It actually happened on several occasions.

Another occasion was recorded for us in Genesis 18:1-33. "Afterward the LORD *APPEARED* to him among the big trees of Mamre...when he raised his eyes, then he looked and there three *MEN* were standing some distance from him...Then he said: 'LORD, if, now, I have found favor in Your eyes, please do not pass by Your servant...and You must have Your *FEET* washed...and let me get you some bread and refresh Your hearts'...Then the LORD said (five more times the LORD speaks)...At this point the men turned from there and got on their way to Sodom; but as for the LORD, He was still *STANDING BEFORE* Abraham (five additional times the LORD spoke)...Then the LORD *WENT ON HIS WAY* when He had finished speaking to Abraham."

In this passage we are to understand the LORD had a physical appearance as one of the "three men" that Abraham met. Thus, Abraham *saw* the LORD, *washed* His feet, gave to Him *a meal*, and *talked* extensively with Him. Then the LORD *walked* away from Abraham. Now, as most of us understand, Abraham, himself, passed this account down to succeeding generations, so that Moses would record it in the inspired Scriptures, for us to read—and believe—though it may seem absolutely incredible to us today!

What is awesome is the fact that Abraham treated this **Man** as the One who had initially called him to leave Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen 12:1-3), as 'the Most High God, possessor of heaven and earth' (Gen 14:19), as the 'Almighty God' Who had spoken to

him just previously (Gen 17:1), and as ‘the Judge of all the earth’ (Gen. 18:25). No wonder Abraham said to Him with fear and trembling, “Indeed now, I who am but dust and ashes have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord” (Gen 18:27).

What is even more breathtaking is the fact that some 2000 years later a Man, named Jesus of Nazareth, talked publicly like He and Abraham were good friends (John 8:31-59). The Jews of that generation, who heard Jesus, thought it was impossible and blasphemous for any “man” to talk this way! But the question could never be “is this impossible or blasphemous,” because it is a Scriptural fact that Abraham talked with a Man who was the LORD, Who was in a human form (incarnate)—i.e., and it was as if they were good friends! The real question must be, and can only be, “did Jesus of Nazareth represent the truth?”

By all means Jacob believed in it—he actually wrestled with the “Man” whom he identified as “God”! Genesis 32:24-30. “Finally Jacob was left by himself. Then a **MAN** began to grapple with him until the dawn ascended... Then He (the Man) said: ‘Your name will no longer be called Jacob (to supplant) but Israel (prince with God), for you have contended with **GOD**... Hence Jacob called the name of the place **Peniel**, because to quote him, ‘I have **seen God face to face** and yet my soul was delivered.’”

Now it is true that on some occasions “God,” who appears incarnate (in human flesh) to the ancients, is not only referred to as a “man,” but also as “*the Angel of the LORD*.” Consequently, some theologians are tempted to dismiss these encounters by exclaiming, “Oh! It was just an Angel representing God.” But this is just as inconsistent and incomplete as saying, “Oh! It was just a Man who was representing God.” Nevertheless, whether a “Man” or a “Messenger (angel) of the LORD,” He is always revered as being **God Himself**. There was absolutely no question by the ancient fathers who this Person was Who appeared in human form, or as an Angel!

Moses was even more emphatic! Exodus 33:11-23 and Numbers 12:6-8 are two examples. (1) “And the LORD spoke to Moses **face to face, just as a man would speak to his fellow**... At this he (Moses) said, ‘cause me to see, please, Your glory’ ... ‘You are not able to see My face (in glory), because no man may see Me (in glory) and yet live.’ And the LORD said further ‘...see My back. But My face (in glory) may not be seen.’” (2) And He (the LORD) went on to say: ‘Hear My words, please. If there came to be a prophet of yours for the LORD, it would be in a vision I would make Myself known to him. In a dream I may also speak to him. But it is not so with My servant Moses! He is entrusted with all of My house. **Mouth to mouth** I speak to him and not by showing him riddles; it is **the very appearance of the LORD** that he beholds!’”

It is clear from this passage that no man could ever be allowed to see the LORD in His glory. Yet it is also absolutely true that the LORD often laid aside His glory, materialized in human form, and spoke directly to His servants so that they oft beheld Him incarnate.

One last example that we will consider here is from Judges 13:3-23. “In time the LORD’S Angel **appeared** to the woman... Then the woman went and said to her husband: ‘There was a **man** of God that came to me, and His **appearance** was like the appearance of the Angel of God, very inspiring’ ... ‘Look, **the man** that came the other day’ ... So the Angel of the LORD said to him: ‘Just why should you ask about My name, seeing it is wonderful?... Then the Angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar...’ We shall positively die, because it is **God that we have seen.**”

Now when Jesus of Nazareth took a public ministry He did not go around saying, “Look at Me, I am God!” He did not need to do this, even as God never did it when He appeared to the ancients. Jesus demonstrated the attributes of Divinity by the mighty signs He performed and the amazing message He proclaimed. In amazing consistency, He was a *Man*, who repeatedly proclaimed that He was sent from God (i.e., a *Messenger or Angel of the LORD*, if you please), and those who trusted in Him *worshipped Him*, just like the ancients who saw Him in ages past.

The first generation of Christians (mostly Jewish, who learned the Scriptures from Jesus) very boldly proclaimed that that generation of Jewish leadership was guilty of the murder of their own Messiah by turning over Jesus to the Roman authorities for death. It must also be remembered, that in so doing, those Christians never had the least desire that the Jewish people perish because of this crime. Rather they hoped there might be repentance and redemption. The repentance did not come, so destruction followed.

It was, however, the coming of “Imperial Christendom,” with its “Replacement Theology,” that hypocritically justified their blood-thirsty jealousy and persecution of the Jewish people by the accusation they were “Christ killers.” Of course, the truth of the matter is, these so-called Christians themselves were Christ killers by that very action. Indeed, it has now been thoroughly documented in the Holocaust record that it was modern “Christendom” who was actually guilty of deicide. Pope John XXIII was bold enough to publicly pray for forgiveness—“*Forgive us for crucifying Thee (Christ) a second time in their (the Jewish) flesh. For we knew not what we did.*” Sad to say Christendom still does not grasp, nor are they willing to admit, the magnitude and horror of their crime. Consequently, we should not be surprised that the destruction of apostate Christendom also looms upon the horizon. After all, the New Testament’s concluding book (Revelation) reveals the final, horrible termination of this religious system under the designation of “Mystery Babylon The Great” (Rev. 17 & 18).

Jack W. Langford

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ADDENDOM

From David Nekrutman, Dec. 10, 2009

Just a thought to ponder—is it possible Scripture (at least the Hebrew canon) is written in human language for us to grasp its message? And while God is depicted in human terms, this is done for us to comprehend a little of the Infinite One?

Response by Jack Langford, Dec. 14, 2009

The amazing thing about the revelation of God in the Hebrew Scriptures is that though He is, on the one hand, the creator of heavens and earth and all powerful beyond our comprehension, yet on the other hand, God is not the abstract deity like those of the pagans. On the contrary, God condescends to our level, puts His hand upon our shoulders and says, ‘I want you to know I love you, and I understand your weaknesses and distress, and we can work together if you but trust Me!’ When I learned of a God like this, it melted my prideful heart, and I yielded to His companionship and Lordship.

Consequently, I don’t believe for one second that the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures in any way modified the revelation to make God comprehensible. Rather, they were inspired to give the revelation that Almighty God is comprehensible and lovingly sensitive to our predicament that came about as a result of sin and rebellion.