

The Work of Incarnation – Jesus as the True Israel

I. Introduction

1. The New Testament upholds and exalts the doctrine of incarnation, not as an abstract theological concept, but as the way in which God brought into actual existence all that He had been revealing and promising throughout Israel's long and agonizing history.
2. Put simply, the incarnation amounted to Yahweh returning to Zion to end Israel's exile, heal its alienation, renew the covenant relationship, and again take up His place in their midst. *This return and work were the nation's expectation and longing; what Israel never imagined was that their God would do this by taking up their failed existence in Himself.*
3. Thus the Scripture's treatment of incarnation isn't concerned with philosophical or metaphysical issues, *but with the profound and shocking way that the God of Abraham had determined to see Abraham's "seed" fulfill their election and calling on behalf of the world. Israel's God would cause Israel to become Israel by Himself embodying Israel.*
4. Yahweh had given the children of Israel five centuries to ponder how the dead and desiccated bones of the covenant household could be renewed to life and full vitality. He'd pledged to do it (Ezek. 37), but such an outcome must have seemed utterly beyond hope.
5. This hope and the divine promise behind it are the context for the incarnation, evident in the way the four gospel writers approached their task of documenting the "Christ event."

II. Jesus as the True Israel

A. Jesus' Genealogy

1. Matthew and Luke provided accounts of Jesus' birth and genealogy, whereas Mark opened his gospel with the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism, and John began with the eternal Logos and the scheme and purpose of incarnation. * cf. Mat. 1:18ff; Luke 1:26ff
2. Both Matthew and Luke explicitly identified Jesus as Israel's promised and long-awaited Messiah (ref. Mat. 1-2; Luke 1-2), but they differ in their genealogical accounts. This difference has puzzled many and caused some to question the accuracy of one or both genealogies, and even the inspiration of these two gospel records. But the differences are easily accounted for when the two accounts are examined closely.
 - a. First of all, the way Matthew constructed his genealogy shows that he was concerned with Jesus' messianic credential and its *regal* significance. He traced Jesus' ancestry only back to Abraham, and then through David's regal line culminating with Joseph. Moreover, he explicitly partitioned that ancestral line into three symmetrical partitions: Abraham to David, David to the Babylonian exile, and exile to Messiah. * 1:1-17

This partitioning, together with his opening statement emphasizing Jesus' descent from Abraham and David, makes it clear that his focus was on establishing Jesus' status as Israel's long-awaited messianic redeemer-king: the covenanted Son of David whom Yahweh promised would end Israel's centuries-long exile initiated by Babylon and inaugurate and preside over the kingdom He had pledged to Abraham.

- b. Luke, on the other hand, constructed his genealogy so as to highlight Jesus' full humanness as a son of Adam. Thus he traced Jesus' descent back through *Mary* rather than Joseph, stating that Jesus, the *supposed* son of Joseph, was actually descended from Eli (Heli), Mary's father. In the ancient world – certainly in the Jewish world, a person's line of descent was traced through his father, and so Luke didn't mention Mary as Jesus' mother, but pointed to His *maternal grandfather* as His most immediate male forefather.

In this way, then, Luke's genealogy underscores two crucial truths: *First*, Jesus was the human son of Mary, but conceived by the Holy Spirit, not a human father (1:26-38; cf. again Mat.1:18-25); but *secondly*, Jesus was fully and truly human as *a son of Adam*, just like all other men (3:23-38). *He wasn't some sort of divine-human hybrid or quasi-human person; He fully shared the fallen Adamic humanness that defines every other human being.* Luke understood that, only in this way – by being made like His brethren in all things, could Jesus truly encounter and heal Adam's race.

3. Taken together, Matthew's and Luke's genealogies provide a composite portrait of Jesus of Nazareth that lays the foundation for all that follows in their accounts of His life and work, culminating with His resurrection and ascension as the glorified regal and priestly Image-Son. The two genealogies show Him to be a bona fide son of Adam, born into and bearing in Himself the curse and brokenness of the human race, but as a member of Abraham's covenant household, and specifically the messianic offspring promised to David. *Thus Matthew and Luke introduce Jesus as the Israelite in whom Israel would become Israel indeed, and so Yahweh's vessel of renewal and ingathering for all of the earth's families.*

B. Jesus' Baptism

Only Matthew and Luke addressed Jesus' birth and genealogy, but all four gospel writers gave an account of Jesus' baptism. This alone shows how significant it was in the early Church's understanding of Jesus as Yahweh's Messiah (ref. esp. John 3:22-36). Many Christians recognize that Jesus' baptism laid the foundation for His public ministry, but far fewer see that episode as crucial substantiation of His incarnational role as True Israel for the sake of Israel. *Indeed, Jesus' full identification with Israel was precisely the reason for His baptism and the meaning of it.*

1. But before examining that topic, it's first important to reiterate John's role as the *Isaianic forerunner*. All four evangelists take note of this, explicitly identifying John as the ambassador promised by Isaiah through whom Yahweh would prepare His people for His return to Zion to liberate, renew and regather them and establish His kingdom. * Isa. 40:1ff

This is the sense in which John's baptism was concerned with *repentance*: It was a symbolic washing at the Jordan River that spoke to Israel's need to return to Yahweh in their hearts and minds and so be prepared to receive Him when He returned to them. Israel passed through the Jordan when they entered Yahweh's sanctuary land after He redeemed them from Egyptian exile, *and so it was to be with their present exile.* The Israelites who went out to the Jordan to undergo John's baptism understood this symbolism, and their repentance was their conscious recommitment to their God, but with the recognition that the presence of His forerunner heralded the end of their alienation. *After five agonizing centuries, Yahweh was returning to them as He'd promised and they wanted to be ready to receive Him.*

John's public relationship with Jesus (announcement and baptism), then, spoke to two crucial issues: Jesus' relationship with the *God of Israel* and His relationship with *Israel itself*.

- a. With respect to Jesus' relationship with Israel's God, the way John identified Him (Mat. 3:11-12; Mark 1:7-8; Luke 3:15-17; John 1:19-27) showed that he recognized Jesus to be the One through whom Yahweh was returning to Zion to judge, purge and renew His people. For the forerunner's role was to prepare Israel for *Yahweh's* coming, and John pointed the people to Jesus as the "coming one" who would winnow Israel. So also he insisted that his own baptizing work had its goal in Jesus being manifested to Israel (John 1:19-31). *John had come to understand that fulfilling His calling as forerunner – preparing the children of Israel to receive their returning covenant God – involved directing their attention and discernment toward the One He had sent.*
- b. At the same time, John's announcement and baptism of Jesus identified Him as the messianic "son" in whom Israel's sonship was faithfully embodied. Israel was "son of God," empowered and led by Yahweh's Spirit to serve Him faithfully and so make Him known in the world (a son is *of* his father, so that faithful sonship testifies of the father), but Israel had failed its election and vocation. Jesus would prove to be the faithful son that Israel had never been – an Israelite in whom there was no guile. * John 1:44ff

These two relationships, then, which John's ministry highlighted, speak to the reality of incarnation: *Jesus, the incarnate Word, was the God of Israel returning to Zion to enact His Word by taking up in Himself Israel's failed existence and calling as elect son on behalf of the world.* Thus Jesus, the messianic servant-son, embodied God's covenant with Israel, fulfilling both sides of the covenant relationship in Himself. * Isa. 42:1-7, 49:1-10

2. These considerations are crucial to understanding Jesus' own perception of His baptism, which He hinted at in His response to John's objection (Mat. 3:13-15): "*Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.*" This statement has puzzled multitudes of Christians who understand "righteousness" in moral and ethical terms. Indeed, they want to raise exactly the same objection that John did: It was utterly inappropriate for Jesus to undergo a baptism of *repentance* when He was the spotless Son of God; He had nothing to repent of. So why would He insist that He needed to be baptized to *fulfill* all righteousness? Did Jesus believe Himself to be in some sense an unrighteous man?
 - a. The dilemma immediately disappears when "righteousness" is properly defined. In its general *biblical* usage, righteousness speaks, not to personal morality or ethics, but conformity to what is right, with "rightness" being defined by God and His purposes and their outworking in and for His creation. Righteousness, then, speaks to integrity and faithfulness in regard to God's will and work; put simply, it is conformity to the truth. In that way, God shows *Himself* to be righteous, not by upholding a moral standard, but by upholding His commitment to accomplish what He has purposed and promised. God is righteous in that He is *faithful* and will not lie or change His mind.
 - b. So Jesus perceived His baptism as "fulfilling all righteousness," not because He needed to repent of any sin or failing, but because He understood and was committed to His mission in the world: His Father had sent Him to take up Israel's life and lot, and that meant showing complete solidarity with His Israelite brethren in their unfaithfulness and guilt under the covenant. *The God of Israel had willed that His messianic servant should be Israel for the sake of Israel, and so Jesus honored and fulfilled "all righteousness" when He fully yielded to this design and its process.* Thus His baptism had nothing to do with His own moral standing before His God and Father, but was a critical dimension of His faithful ownership of His messianic identity and mission.

3. Jesus' baptism was a key component of His obedience to His calling as Israel's Messiah, and the Lord openly attested Him when He declared in the hearing of the assembled crowd that this man, Jesus of Nazareth, was *His beloved and well-pleasing son*. Many have viewed this pronouncement as simply God's affirmation of Jesus' obedient sonship, while others have detected in it an opaque reference to Jesus' unique status as God's incarnate Son. But the surrounding context – and especially what followed immediately after this episode – shows that God intended His words to identify Jesus to Israel as uniquely what Israel itself was supposed to be. God had chosen and consecrated the Abrahamic people to be His beloved and well-pleasing “son” for the sake of His purposes in the world, but neither the patriarchs nor their descendents had ever been able to fulfill their election and calling.

The eventual result was the Babylonian siege that left Israel in exile, alienated from their God who had abandoned His sanctuary and not returned when the temple was rebuilt. For five long centuries the Israelite people had languished in their distress and waited expectantly for Yahweh to arise and resolve their calamity as He had promised, and John's ministration at the Jordan testified that that time was at hand: Yahweh was returning to Zion as her Redeemer to end her exile, gather her children, and renew the covenant (cf. again Isa. 40:1-11 with Mat. 3:1-3; Mark 1:1-5; Luke 3:1-6; John 1:19-23), which meant that He was raising up from within Israel a faithful servant-son for that work (so Isaiah's four *Servant Songs*).

This, then, was the significance of Yahweh's pronouncement: *By identifying and affirming Jesus as He did in the context of His baptism and John's ministration, Israel's God was bearing witness to His people that this man was the faithful servant “Israel” through whom the reconciliation and restoration symbolized by John's baptism would be realized.* All Israel went out to John in the hope that their exile was coming to an end; Yahweh's pronouncement reoriented and focused that hope by directing it toward Jesus.

This also explains the significance of Yahweh giving His Spirit to Jesus. This might appear puzzling viewed through the lens of Jesus' deity; why would Jesus need the Spirit when He was “very God”? But again, Jesus' sonship here points to His status as *True Israel*, and thus Yahweh's “man of the Spirit” (cf. Isa. 42:1-7, 61:1-3 with Luke 4:14-21). He had shown solidarity with Israel by undergoing their baptism, and Yahweh affirmed this status by endowing Him with His Spirit. *He had given His Spirit to Israel to empower them to fulfill their sonship through all of its trials* (Isa. 63:7-14), *and so it was with Jesus as He prepared to undergo Israel's testing.* Hence His baptism led directly into the wilderness.

Jesus' public interaction with John the Baptist, then, was crucially important in the outworking of His messianic calling, especially in regard to His self-presentation to Israel. First, because John was the forerunner promised by Isaiah, his interaction with Jesus associated Him with *Yahweh's return to Zion* (cf. again Luke 1:68). But secondly, Jesus' open identification with His Israelite brethren in baptism linked Him with *Israel itself* as Yahweh's elect son, servant, disciple and witness. And thirdly, Yahweh's response to Jesus' baptism – punctuated by John's own witness – showed that He was *Israel in the way Israel had failed to be*; He was the faithful servant-son ordained to be Yahweh's agent of redemption and renewal.

All of this attested that Jesus was Israel for the sake of Israel, the One through whom Yahweh's purposes and promises were coming to fruition. Thus the Spirit drove Him from the Jordan east into the wilderness to undertake in Himself the nation's ancient testing. Jesus had made Himself one with them in baptism, and now He would bear their own ordeal under a trial of faith and faithfulness – not just to succeed where they had failed, but for the sake of Israel's renewal.