

LOGOS QUESTIONS

Is Jesus God Incarnate?



University of
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LOGOS
Institute for Analytic and
Exegetical Theology

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Introduction

Many religions claim that gods have appeared to mortals in some form or other, sometimes as human beings. But Christianity is unique in that it is founded upon the claim that one particular human, Jesus of Nazareth, is God Incarnate. Inevitably, down through the centuries, this central claim of Christianity has been the subject of discussion and dispute—which continues to the present day. One sort of question this raises has to do with the evidence for the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was a divine being. This is a question to which historians have sought to address themselves. It is also a question that motivates much Christian apologetics, which deals with reasons to believe that Christianity is true. However, a rather different sort of approach begins from the assumption that Jesus of Nazareth is God Incarnate and seeks to work from that assumption to see if some sense can be made of the notion that one person is both fully human and fully divine, as Christians have traditionally claimed. That is the issue to which I shall address myself here.

In the first section, I shall consider what it means when Christians say that Jesus of Nazareth is fully divine and fully human. Then, having gotten that a bit clearer, I shall offer an outline of several ways of thinking about this claim that have been discussed in recent theology. These are models of the incarnation, that is, conceptual pictures that help us get an idea

of what it might mean to say Jesus is God Incarnate even if the conceptual picture doesn't give us the whole story. Having done this, I shall briefly address several important objections to these ways of thinking about the incarnation in a third section. The conclusion summarizes the main threads of the discussion.

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Fully Divine, Fully Human?

What we might call *classical Christology* takes as its theological starting point in thinking about the person of Christ both Scripture and the summary of Christian doctrine found in the creeds of the early church. The most important of these for thinking about the incarnation is the so-called “Chalcedonian definition” of the person of Christ, written by the Fathers of the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451. Amongst other things this statement claims that the right way to understand the apostolic teaching on Christ is to affirm that he was both fully human and fully divine. This was contrary to some in the early church who believed that it was not feasible or desirable to claim that Christ is both fully human and fully divine. Instead, these naysayers sought to qualify either his divinity or his humanity so that he was thought to be a quasi-divine human being, or a human-shaped divine being or perhaps even a fully divine person and a fully human person somehow co-existing in one body. The Chalcedonian definition resists all these claims. Classical Christology followed suit.

The upshot of this is that Christians have traditionally affirmed that Jesus of Nazareth was fully human, like us, but not merely human as we are. For, unlike us, he was also fully divine. This is usually called *the two natures doctrine of the incarnation* because the central idea is that one person has two natures, a divine nature (making him fully and truly divine), and a human nature (making him fully and truly human). How can one being be both fully human and fully divine without ending up affirming the existence of two persons co-existing in one body? The answer of the leaders of the early church was to suggest that Jesus was a divine person who assumes a human nature in addition to his divine nature at the first moment of the incarnation. As the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, he is eternally and necessarily divine, possessing a divine nature as a member of the Trinity. His human nature is not natural to him in the same way. Rather, it is something he takes on in addition to his divine nature in order to bring about human salvation. As Thomas Aquinas puts it at one point, the incarnation is like the Son of God putting on the garment of human nature. A garment may be put on and taken off. It is not natural to the person, but assumed. In a similar way, the human nature of Christ is “put on” by God the Son; he assumes it. The upshot of this is that in Christ we have one divine person, possessing two natures. One of these is his divine nature. The other is his human nature.

Normally, when we think of a being having a nature we think of it as having one and only one nature. For instance, human persons have a human nature, not a Martian nature or an angelic nature. The reason for this is that we normally think something can have at most one such nature—no more. Yet Christ is said to have two natures. How can that be? One way to think about this is to say that Christ is unique. He is not a creature with two natures (like a Martian-human). Rather, he is a divine person with a human nature. Or, to put it another way, he is the creator taking on the nature of a creature. It is rather like the avatar that someone may take on in order to play a computer game as a particular character. The person is not the avatar. Yet the avatar is something like a “nature” that the person assumes

in order to move around in the simulated world of the computer game and interact with other characters. According to defenders of classical Christology, the incarnation is something like that. God the Son takes on the nature of a human being in order to live and move and be a part of the world he has created. It is his human nature in a way similar to the avatar in the computer game, which is the avatar of the particular player who “owns” it. Nevertheless, there is a distinction to be made between the avatar and the person playing the game. Similarly, there is a distinction to be made between the person of the Son of God, as a member of the divine Trinity, and the human nature he assumes in the incarnation.

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Models of the Incarnation

This brings us to the question of models for the incarnation. In a sense, we have already been talking about models of the incarnation. For the concepts of “nature” and “person” are normally applied to Jesus of Nazareth by defenders of classical Christology in order to provide a conceptual framework for understanding the incarnation. Of course no account of the incarnation can fully grasp what is at stake if, as almost all Christians maintain, the incarnation is a divine mystery. But a mystery is not necessarily a contradiction. Something can be mysterious because it is beyond our understanding without it being contradictory. A good example of this is quantum mechanics. Most humans of average intelligence don’t really grasp the physics of quantum mechanics. There is something mysterious about it. That is not because it is contradictory or incoherent, but is simply because it is a matter that is so conceptually challenging that few people can really make sense of it.

The incarnation, like the Trinity, is a theological issue like that. It is beyond us. Does that mean it is not worth trying to understand it at all? Not necessarily. We want to understand the world around us even if we don’t fully understand the fundamental physical concepts that give rise to the world as we experience it. Similarly, if the incarnation is true, that is, if Jesus of Nazareth really is God Incarnate, then this is a momentous truth that all human beings have a stake in. We should do all we can to understand such a truth even if it is still somewhat mysterious to us in order that we might have a better grasp of this divine-human being who comes to bring about human salvation.

What is meant by the idea of providing a model of the incarnation, then? Well, a model in the sense I mean it here is a simplified account of more complex data. We use models all the time from toy model airplanes to complex meteorological models to predict our weather patterns, and models of things like atoms in physics textbooks that help us better understand things that no human being has ever seen with the naked eye.

Inevitably, in discussing a topic that has been around as long as the incarnation has been, there are a number of different models on offer. Let us focus on two that are consistent with the two natures doctrine of classical Christology with which we began. If Jesus of Nazareth is indeed one divine person with a divine nature who assumes a human nature, what might

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that mean? On one way of thinking about this, a person is an entity with a center of consciousness and will who acts in the world and is morally responsible for certain things. The Roman theologian Boethius said that persons are independent substances of a rational nature. In other words, persons are autonomous thinking things. This is similar to our modern notions of persons.

Is the divine person of the Son a “person” in this way? Some theologians say yes. They think that the persons of the Trinity are similar to our conventional way of thinking about persons. In which case each divine person is a center of action, will, and consciousness that is in intimate communion with the other divine persons of the Godhead. But an alternative way of thinking about this suggests that it is a mistake to extrapolate from our human ways of thinking about these things to the divine. God is so different from us that the best we can hope for is an analogous sense in which the members of the Godhead are persons. This seems intuitive. After all, God is much greater than we are, and is not a creature, not dependent on other things, not limited as we are, and so forth. So perhaps a better way to think of the person of the Son is as something analogous to what we think of as a person, without pressing that too far.

What about the “natures” of Christ? The divine nature he has naturally and constitutionally is what distinguishes him as a divine person of the Trinity. So whatever it is that the divine persons share as divine persons—whatever it is that makes them divine persons rather than some created thing—that is what the Son of God possesses naturally and constitutionally. He is a divine person of the Trinity who possesses the divine nature.

What about his human nature? There are various views on this too. We can sketch two sorts of approach. On the first of these a human nature is a property, like the property

“being six feet tall,” or “having brown eyes.” Perhaps it is a rich property or a property with lots of conjuncts that we can wrap up into one big property so that human nature of Jesus includes all his particularities like his height, weight, hair-color, place of birth, and so on. We can call this the property view of human nature or the *abstract-nature view* because properties are often thought to be abstract things like numbers. On this way of thinking, in becoming incarnate God the Son took on the property or properties necessary and sufficient for exemplifying a human. Whatever it is that one needs to have in order to be human, whatever properties are requisite for instantiating humanity, he assumed at the first moment of incarnation.

A second way to think about this matter is to say that God the Son assumed a concrete thing in becoming human. In this context, a concrete thing is an actual thing in the world like a tree or a statue, rather than an abstract thing like a number or concept. We can call this the *concrete-nature view* because the idea is that some actual, particular thing is what was required for the incarnation. Now, traditionally Christians have thought that the Bible teaches human beings are composed of two concrete things, rightly related. These are two substances (where substances are things that bear properties). The first is the human soul; the second is the human body. When these two substances are rightly related what we have is a complete human being, which is a concrete sort of thing. Such a view of the composition of human beings is usually called substance dualism because two substances, the human body and human soul, together make up a human being. Today, fewer Christian thinkers are committed to substance dualism. Some think that human beings may be composed of just one material substance, the human body, along with a human mind. Yet, however one thinks of the composition of human beings, the idea is that whatever it is that composes humans, that thing is the sort of thing God the Son assumed at the first moment of incarnation.

Objections and Questions

Having briefly outlined two common models of the incarnation, let us briefly consider a particular worry that has been raised for each in turn.

One concern with the abstract-nature view is that it seems insufficient as an account of the incarnation. Is the property of human nature enough to be truly human? Does this include a human mind and consciousness? Does it include a human will as well as a divine will? Some worry that this sort of view is rather like the difference between Clark Kent and Superman. Kent and Superman are one person, the Kryptonian Kal-El. When Kal-El operates in the guise of Superman or in the guise of Kent, he wills as Kal-El in both circumstances. He does not have two wills as such. Yet the later classical Christology canonized by the church fathers of the Third Council of Constantinople in AD 681, which sought to extrapolate some of the implications of the Chalcedonian “definition” of Christ, maintained that if Christ is truly human he must have a human will as well as a divine will. This is a conceptual challenge for those who defend a version of the abstract-nature view of the incarnation. For it is difficult to see how assuming an abstract thing like a property brings with it a fully human way of willing as well.

The defender of the concrete-nature view needn't be worry about meeting the requirement that Christ has a human will as well as a divine will. Its potential shortcomings are in the opposite direction, theologically speaking. For on the concrete-nature view we appear to have too many persons in Christ. To see this, suppose we have a complete human nature, that is, a human body and soul rightly related. Once we have a body and soul rightly related, don't we then have a human person? If our answer to this question is in the affirmative, then we have a problem. For earlier we said that the two natures doctrine of classical Christology was an attempt to resist the claim that Christ was two persons sharing one body (a view called Nestorianism). One way to resist this conclusion is to claim that in assuming a concrete human nature God the Son took on the complement of a human person. That is, he took on the thing that would have formed a human person if the incarnation hadn't happened. But because the incarnation did happen at the moment of conception, the human in question (Jesus) never formed a substance independent of a divine person. Instead, God the Son uploaded himself, as it were, into the human nature of Jesus at conception. This means that the human nature of Christ is always “owned” by a divine person. It never exists as a person independent of God the Son in the way that you and I exist as independent persons. For when we were conceived God the Son didn't upload himself into our human natures in the way that he did with Christ. This means that the concrete-nature view has the strange consequence that you and I are human persons because God doesn't upload himself into our human natures at conception. We are human persons because God refrains from assuming us.

Conclusion

What have we learned? Traditionally, Christians have claimed that Jesus of Nazareth is, in fact, the Second Person of the Trinity incarnate. That is, they have affirmed that Jesus is a divine person with a divine nature who at the incarnation takes on a human nature in addition to his divinity, in order to bring about human salvation. This is the two natures doctrine. This doctrine can be construed in various ways. We sketched two models of the incarnation consistent with the two natures doctrine. The first of these was the abstract-nature view, where the divine person of the Son assumes the property or properties necessary and sufficient for exemplifying human nature. The second of these was the concrete-nature view, according to which the divine person of the Son assumes a concrete particular thing in order to become human.

Having given some conceptual framework for thinking about the incarnation we then turned to consider objections to the two models. Although it seems to me that neither model is out of bounds, theologically speaking, there are different conceptual “costs” involved in opting for one or the other approach. Defenders of the abstract-nature view have to work harder to explain how Christ has two wills if they think this is an implication of the Chacedonian definition. By contrast, defenders of the concrete-nature view have to do some fancy metaphysical footwork to ensure they do not end up endorsing something like Nestorianism, the claim that there are two persons in Christ.

There is much more to be said about the incarnation. To adapt what the writer of the Fourth Gospel says at the conclusion of his work, if everything about Christian teaching on Christ were written down I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written (Jn. 21:25). But perhaps this short essay may serve to whet the reader’s theological appetite to pursue the matter further.

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Further Reading

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The Logos Institute at the University of St Andrews is a centre for excellence in the study of analytic and exegetical theology. It is committed to scholarship that reflects a concern for: transparency; simplicity in expression; clear, logical argumentation; and rigorous analysis. It also reflects a radical commitment to interdisciplinary engagement, particularly between the fields of philosophy, theology, biblical studies, and the sciences. Its faculty consists of world-leading scholars in the fields of biblical studies, theology, and philosophy.

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