

The Return of the King – A Biblical Theology of Incarnation

1. Incarnation must be understood, not in the abstract categories of deity and humanity, but in biblical terms as the *return of Yahweh to Zion*, with all that theme encompasses and implies. As such, incarnation is the substantial fulfillment of the great promise, hope and longing developed in Israel’s scriptures, showing that common notions about it must be reworked.
 - a. Christians are commonly taught to understand the incarnation in terms of a suitable atoning sacrifice. That is, only a human being can stand in the place of another human, but only a perfect human being can atone for the sins of other people. Thus Jesus needed to be both divine (hence sinless) and human in order to pay the penalty for sinners.
 - b. Incarnation *does* pertain to atonement for sin, but atonement in the Scripture isn’t about legal satisfaction in the way people typically conceive it. That is to say, God’s intent wasn’t to exact payment for the debt and guilt associated with violating legal demands, but to see His human creatures conformed to their created nature and purpose. His goal wasn’t justice under “law,” but a human race of faithful image-children.
 - c. Sin is deviation from the truth, so that sin for human beings is deviation from who and what they are according to God’s creative design and intent for them. And God’s intent was that humans should be one Spirit with Him, manifesting and administering His life, mind and loving will in the earth as regal and priestly image-children, so that seeing the children is seeing the Father. *Sin, then, exists when a person’s life testifies of himself.*
 - d. Atonement for sin, then, is about righting what is wrong; it is vindicating and establishing what is true by exposing, condemning and overcoming falseness. *Put simply, atonement is concerned with a thing’s conformity to the truth of its created nature and function, not its compliance with a legal standard.*
2. This is precisely the reason that Jesus’ atoning work was *cosmic* in its scope, a truth that escapes many Christians and confounds conventional soteriological formulations that focus on human salvation as the issue in atonement.
 - a. Indeed, cosmic atonement makes no sense when atonement is understood in terms of legal satisfaction, for the non-human creation isn’t guilty of violating divine commandments or legal standards.
 - b. But if atonement addresses “sin,” biblically defined as deviation from the truth, then it must be universal in its intent and effect. For human sin – man’s deviation from the truth of himself by insisting upon self-definition and self-direction – subjected the wider creation to deviation and falseness (Gen. 3:17), since its proper (truthful) existence depends on the Creator’s image-children fulfilling their created design. In the nature of the case, human atonement implies cosmic atonement, so that human renewal entails creational renewal (cf. Isaiah 11:1-12, 65:17-66:24; Col. 1:19-20; Rev. 21:1-5; etc.).
3. And so, while it is true that incarnation is the basis and means of atonement, the relationship between them is significantly different from what many Christians (and soteriological formulations) understand. Atonement does concern remediation of sin, but as remediation involves *reconciliation* unto the *realization of shalom* – the Creator/creature and inter-creational intimacy and harmony – God as “all in all” – for which He created the cosmos.

*Indeed, this intent in the incarnation is evident in the **very fact** of it. Incarnation isn't some abstract conjoining of the divine and human natures, but the Creator-God taking up in Himself the existence of His alienated image-bearers.*

- a. In scriptural parlance, incarnation involves the God of Israel returning to Zion to liberate His people from their captivity in exile (which resulted from and expressed their alienation from Him due to covenant unfaithfulness) and restore them to Himself for the sake of their covenant calling and mission in the world.
 - b. Incarnation is the Creator taking up human existence under the creational curse, not to vindicate legal justice, but to vanquish the curse and heal and renew His creation by becoming one with it in and through man as He intended from the beginning.
4. Understanding atonement in this way shows that the incarnation should not be perceived as the first step in the process leading to atonement at Calvary, but itself the **very substance of atonement**. For by incarnation, God achieved the comprehensive and everlasting intimacy between Himself and man that was His primary goal in creating an image-bearer.
- a. This incarnational atonement, then, was worked out in Jesus' life through His faithful sonship, which involved His continual and faultless contradiction of His Adamic humanness ("likeness of sinful flesh" – Rom. 8:3) in perfect submission and communion with His Father. This is what the Hebrews writer meant when he insisted that the *man* Jesus "was tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin." * Heb. 4:15; cf. 2:1-18
 - b. This atonement reached its apex at Calvary, where Jesus confronted and condemned Adamic humanness, not as it existed in His own person, but in the human race as a whole. For there, on the cross, the full extent and power of Adamic contradiction, hostility and opposition – human "sin" – directed itself against Jesus, which He embraced in order to put it to death in His own death. By taking up Adam's calamity and resolving it in Himself, Jesus, the Son of Man, fulfilled His own calling to be the New Adam.

Hence Paul's concise summary: "*What Torah (God's prescription of sonship) could not do, weak as it was through the flesh (Adamic humanness), God did, sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and with regard to sin, He condemned sin in the flesh of Jesus.*"

5. The incarnation, then, was both the *substance* and the *effectual source* of divine-human reconciliation, and so also of Creator-creation reconciliation. Stated in other terms, the incarnation was the very substance of the **recovery and perfection of sacred space**, poignantly evident in the Scripture's use of *sanctuary* imagery to depict it.

Yahweh had pledged to return to a restored and fitted sanctuary in order to dwell evermore with His faithful image-children; the incarnation was both the fulfillment of that promise and the revelation of just what He meant by this promise.

- a. He would return to His covenant people, not by again inhabiting a physical sanctuary in their midst, but by taking up their existence – their *election* and their *failing* – in Himself.
- b. He would become *Israel* for the sake of Israel, in order that Israel (the Abrahamic "seed") should become Israel in truth and fulfill its calling to bring His blessing to all people.

- c. And by becoming Israel in truth, the incarnate Yahweh became *man* in truth – man as image-son manifesting the Creator-God in His creation.
- d. And by making man truly human in Himself, Yahweh was addressing the creation’s alienation. Human violation brought creational alienation, so that human reconciliation and renewal signaled the same outcome for the non-human creation (Col. 1:19-20). *Thus the incarnation was the beginning and sure pledge, not just of a renewed human race, but a renewed heavens and earth.* * Rom. 8:1-23

Israel’s prophets obliquely connected Yahweh’s dwelling place with the messianic figure, *and the New Testament writers picked up this connection and made it explicit and concrete.*

- 1) Jesus is the fulfillment of *Jacob’s dream* at Bethel. * cf. Gen. 28:10-22; John 1:43-51
- 2) So Jesus fulfilled in Himself Yahweh’s promise to restore and return to His *temple*. He made this clear by His words (John 2:13-21, 4:19-26, 14:1-23), but also by His shocking and scandalous actions in taking to Himself the priestly prerogative that belonged to the temple and its ministrations, most notably the prerogative to deal with sin (Mark 2:1-12).
- 3) Jesus’ actions during the Feast of Booths further underscore this (John 7:1-53). At the feast’s climax, when the high priest poured out water in the sight of the assembly waving palm branches and praying the *hosanna* of Psalm 118, Jesus stood and loudly proclaimed that all who believe in *Him* would see living water flow from their innermost being.
 - He was echoing Israel’s prophets, who spoke of life-giving water flowing out of Yahweh’s temple in the day when He returned to Zion to cleanse and renew His people and His creation and establish His everlasting kingdom (ref. Ezek. 47:1-12; Joel 3:16-21; Zech. 14:1-11).
 - But He was locating this promise and its fulfillment in Himself, claiming that the life-giving Spirit was going to cause “living water” to spring up in the very core of His followers’ being because they drank of Him (v. 37). *Jesus was declaring Himself to be the source of the “river of the water of life,” and therefore the true sanctuary.*
* cf. also Rev. 21:22, 22:1-2
- 4) And if Jesus is the true sanctuary, He is the fulfillment of the *law of the central sanctuary*, which prescribed to the sons of Israel that they meet with Yahweh in the place where He determined to put His name (Deut. 12:1-14).

This requirement was the reason for the question posed by the Samaritan woman in John’s gospel (4:19-24), and Jesus’ answer showed that He was replacing Jerusalem and its temple as the place of divine-human encounter, and not just for Israel, but for all men.
* cf. also Isaiah 2:1-3, 11:1-13

6. And if the incarnation is the essence and beginning of God’s recovery of sacred space, it is the ***pinnacle revelation of His ultimate design for His creation.*** And it reveals that design by embodying it: *The incarnation, with its own destiny in resurrection, was the first-fruits of God’s new creation that would see all things “summed up” (i.e., attain their ultimate glory) in the glorified Son.* * Eph. 1:9-10; Col. 1:15-19; cf. also Rom. 8:1-25; 1 Cor. 15:20-28