



The Association of Hebrew Catholics Lecture  
Series 2021-2022

# The Messiah of Israel

## Talk 1. Why Did the Son of God Become Man?

# Aquinas on the Marvel of the Incarnation

“Among divine works, this most especially exceeds reason: for **nothing can be thought of which is more marvelous** than this divine accomplishment: that the true God, the Son of God, should become true man. And because among them all it is most marvelous, it follows that **toward faith in this particular marvel all other miracles are ordered.**” *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV, ch. 27, n. 1.

# Origen on the Marvel of the Incarnation

“Of all the marvelous and splendid things about him there is one that **utterly transcends the limits of human wonder** and is beyond the capacity of our weak mortal intelligence to think of or understand, namely, how this mighty power of the divine majesty, the very word of the Father, and the very wisdom of God, in which were created “all things visible and invisible” (Col 1:16), can be believed to have existed within the compass of that man who appeared in Judaea; yes, and how the wisdom of God can have entered into a woman’s womb and been born as a little child.”

- Origen, *On First Principles* 2.6.2, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2013), 136–37.

## Philippians 2:5–8

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

# Marvel of the Incarnation

- St. Leo the Great: “Lowliness was taken on by majesty, weakness by strength, mortality by the immortal.”
- St. Irenaeus: “He took humanity into himself, the invisible becoming visible, the incomprehensible being made comprehensible, the impassible becoming capable of suffering, and the Word being made human, thus summing up all things in himself.”

- Leo the Great, Letter 28 to Flavian (Tome of Leo, “Lectis dilectionis tuae”), in *Letters*, trans. Edmund Hunt (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1957), 95.
- Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.16.6, in James R. Payton, Jr., *Irenaeus on the Christian Faith: A Condensation of Against Heresies* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 70.

# St. Cyril of Alexandria on the Marvel of the Incarnation

“The mystery of Christ runs the **risk of being disbelieved precisely because it is so incredibly wonderful**. . . . He who was above all creation was in our human condition; the invisible one was made visible in the flesh; he who is from the heavens and from on high was in the likeness of earthly things; the immaterial one could be touched; he who is free in his own nature came in the form of a slave; he who blesses all creation became accursed; he who is all righteousness was numbered among transgressors; **life itself came in the appearance of death.**”

- Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John* 1:14a, in Norman Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria* (London: Routledge, 2000), 105–6.

# The Incarnation Is the Reverse of Other Miracles

- In the healings and resurrections worked by Jesus, weakness put on strength.
- The Incarnation operates in the reverse direction. Infinite but invisible strength puts on visible weakness; eternity puts on time; omnipresence puts on finite space.

# Objections to the Incarnation

## 1. The Incarnation Is Impossible or Contradictory

- When he consecrated the Temple, Solomon said: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27).

# Objection: The Incarnation Is Impossible

## Response

- Jesus has two natures, divine and human, united in His one Person, but which remain **distinct**. His divine nature remains immutable, eternal, omnipresent, and omnipotent. His human nature remains mutable, in time and space. **All change is on the part of His humanity.**

# Objection: The Incarnation Is Contradictory

## Response

- A contradiction occurs when something is said to be and not be in the same way at the same time. It would be contradictory for God to be God and cease to be God.

# Analogy of the Union of the Human Body and Soul

- The best analogy falls infinitely short, but it may be helpful. Our human nature is composed of two very different principles: a soul that is spiritual and immortal, and a corruptible animal body. In this union of body and soul, the body is elevated to participate in and express the life of the soul.

# Analogy of the Union of the Human Body and Soul

- Like the union of body and soul in every human being, Christ's two natures retain their own identity.
- Athanasian Creed: "He is entirely one, not by a confusion of substance, but by the unity of person. For just as one man is a rational soul and flesh, just so the one Christ is God and man."

# Analogy of the Union of the Human Body and Soul

- The analogy, however, falls short for two reasons. First, the difference between the human soul and body is infinitely less than that between the divine nature and the human nature joined in the Incarnation.
- Secondly, human soul and body are two co-principles that together form one human nature. The humanity and divinity of Christ are not joined to form one new nature but are joined in one Person.

# Hypostatic Union

- The union of humanity and divinity does not occur in the nature, but in the Person, for which reason it is called the *hypostatic union*. “Hypostatic” here signifies “personal” or “in the person.”

# Objection That the Incarnation, Even if Possible, Is Unfitting

- Another more difficult objection may concede that while it might not be impossible for God to assume a created nature and become man without ceasing to be God, it seems maximally unfitting, both to God's majesty and to human reverence for Him. St. Anselm poses this objection in his treatise, *Why God Became Man*:

Unbelievers . . . object that we are inflicting injury and insult on God when we assert that he descended into a woman's womb; was born of a woman; grew up nurtured on milk and human food and . . . was subject to weariness, hunger, thirst, scourging, crucifixion between thieves, and death.

- Anselm, *Why God Became Man* [*Cur Deus homo?*], in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, 268.

# Objection That the Incarnation, Even if Possible, Is Unfitting

- Even if God could assume a human nature, it would be unfitting for Him to do so because it would debase His infinite majesty. It would lower Him by an infinite amount, make the Eternal One subject to time and space, make Him dependent on the power of creatures, expose Him to the irreverence of His sinful creatures, and make Him the target of the jealousy, cruelty, mockery, hatred, and indifference of men.
- This objection is made by many Muslims and Jews and was in fact what led to the first heresy, Docetism, which held that the humanity of Christ was not real but a mere appearance.

# Response: God's Glory Is Magnified through the Divine Condescension

Philippians 2:4-11

- A biblical answer to this objection is that God magnifies His glory not by clutching at His dignity, but through the divine self-emptying or condescension.
- The term “condescension” often has a negative connotation, implying that a person of superior rank lowers himself in a way that humiliates the other by pointing out the difference in rank. Here, however, we are using the term in its etymological sense with no negative connotation, to mean a true “lowering of oneself to be with another.” The Christian dogma of the Incarnation is that God lowers Himself infinitely not to humiliate us, but to bridge the gap and raise us up.

# Response: God's Glory Is Magnified through the Divine Condescension

- Indeed, the entire revelation given to Israel continually reveals the divine condescension. God chooses a particular people to be His from all the peoples on the face of the earth, and so He calls Abraham out of Mesopotamia. He reveals Himself progressively to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, says that He will betroth them as His bride (Hos 2:19–20), and dwells among them by establishing His glory in the Temple and by hearing their prayers.

# Response: God's Glory Is Magnified through the Divine Condescension

- This marvelous condescension of God shown in the election of Israel is how He wills to show His glory, as Michael Wyschogrod implies:  
If Hashem does not find his dignity impaired by being known as the creator of the world, the elector of Abraham, and the redeemer of Abraham's seed from the land of Egypt, then it is not the task of man to protect Hashem's dignity more than he wishes it protected. We must learn from the word of God which attributions constitute the proper praise of God and which do not.
- (Hashem is Hebrew for "the Name," used as a circumlocution for God.)

# Response: God's Glory Is Magnified through the Divine Condescension

- We can take this line of reasoning one step further. If God has not “impaired His dignity” by taking on the children of Israel to be His people, uniting them to Himself by a unique covenant, why could He not condescend further to bind Himself to that people by taking on a human nature united to His Divine Person by the hypostatic union, so as to be born in Israel?

# Response: God's Glory Is Magnified through the Divine Condescension

- God shows us what is fitting for Him to do through His own freedom. The Gospels reveal that God was willing to undergo humiliation, suffering, and death to manifest His love for us. This continues the divine condescension shown in the election of Israel and takes it to the very end. As John writes: “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (John 13:1).

# Response: God's Glory Is Magnified through the Divine Condescension

- In Philippians 2:4-8, St. Paul presents the Incarnation as the supreme model for our imitation:

Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

# Response: God's Glory Is Magnified through the Divine Condescension

- If the divine condescension is the characteristic mark of the Old Testament revelation, then the Incarnation of God is in some way the most quintessentially Jewish element of the Christian faith! The Incarnation manifests God's goodness more than anything else, precisely through its unbounded self-emptying. The Incarnation greatly increases our reverence for God, for it makes us see how worthy of love He is, who has loved us first with such a love as to become man for us.

# Objection to the Unique Incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth

- Jewish theologians object to the Christian dogma of a unique and definitive Incarnation in one person: Jesus of Nazareth. They hold that God has become “incarnate” in the Jewish people collectively, by dwelling in and with them in history. Rabbi Jacob Neusner writes:

In these ways Christianity insists that only one is incarnate, only one is the Messiah, and only one ascends the mount and bears authority to speak as did Moses at Sinai. . . . Here is where Judaism and Christianity, in all their dazzling varieties, must part company, and without regret on either side. Christianity stands or falls on the claim of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

- Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, *Jewish-Christian Debates: God, Kingdom, Messiah* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 215–16.

# Objection to the Unique Incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth

- Does the indwelling of God in His people contradict the unique Incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth?
- The Incarnation is the most perfect way God indwells in His people, for the Incarnation is the supreme Indwelling. What better way for God to dwell in His chosen people than to become Emmanuel—God with us—in person. This happened when the Son of God personally assumed a human nature in the line of Abraham and of David, in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

# Objection to the Unique Incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth

- From the time of Abraham God indwelt in the Jewish people through their implicit faith in the coming Messiah, who was promised to them as a universal blessing in Abraham's seed. This indwelling through faith was later manifested in marvelous ways, as in the pillar of cloud and of fire, in the Tent of Meeting, and in the glory that enveloped the Ark of the Covenant and dwelt in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. Likewise, the indwelling of God in the people was manifested in the voice of the prophets, in God's hearing the prayers of the people, and in His gift of the holy Law of Moses.

# Objection to the Unique Incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth

- Although Jesus only dwelt on earth for thirty-three years, the indwelling of the Son of God sacramentally continues in the Church through the mystery of the Eucharist, in which He is substantially present on every Catholic altar and in every tabernacle. This indwelling culminates in His intimate union with us in Holy Communion, nourishing us with His very life.

# The Incarnation Is Ordered to Man's Supernatural End

- The mystery of our supernatural end consists in an infinitely disproportionate *elevation* from the human to the divine order through the infusion of grace which is a participation in the divine life.
- The Incarnation is the mystery of an infinite *lowering* in which the divine Word takes on human nature and flesh.
- God lowers Himself to elevate us.

# Divine Interchange

- God took on what is ours—human nature—so as to bring us up to what is His—sharing in His divine life and beatitude.
- 2 Corinthians 8:9: “Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”

# Divine Interchange

- The Son of God became a son of man so that the sons and daughters of men could become sons and daughters of God through Him.

# Divine Interchange

## St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*

“For it was for this end that the Word of God was made man, and He who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man . . . might become the son of God. For by no other means could we have attained to incorruptibility and immortality, unless we had been united to incorruptibility and immortality. But how could we be joined to incorruptibility and immortality, unless, first, incorruptibility and immortality had become that which we also are.”

# Divine Interchange

## St. Augustine, *Sermon 23*

“It was not enough for our God to promise us divinity in himself, unless he also took on our infirmity, as though to say, ‘Do you want to know how much I love you, how certain you ought to be that I am going to give you my divine reality? I took to myself your mortal reality.’ ... **The Son of God became a son of man, in order to make sons of men into sons of God.**”

Augustine, Sermon 23B.1, in *Sermons. III/11. Newly Discovered Sermons*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1997), 37.

# Divine Interchange

## St. Leo the Great

- “It was precisely so that we might be able to become children of God that he was made the child of a human being. Had he not come down to us in this humility, none could come to him by any merits of their own.”
- “He grafted himself into us and us into himself in such a way that God’s descent to human affairs became the elevation of human beings to those divine.”

• Leo the Great, Sermon 6.2.1 and 27.2.2 on the Nativity, in *Sermons*, trans. J. P. Freeland and A. J. Conway, FC 93 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 106, 112.

# Divine Interchange Liturgy

- Offertory of the Mass in the Roman rite: “By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”
- Collect for Christmas Mass: “O God, who wonderfully created the dignity of human nature and still more wonderfully restored it, grant, we pray, that we may share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”

# The Incarnation Is an Infinite Bridge between God and Man

- Only the Incarnation could establish a bridge between God and man, spanning both extremes and making a path from earth to heaven because it had first made a path from heaven to earth.
- The humanity of the Son of God is a ladder between heaven and earth like that seen by Jacob in his dream at Bethel which “reached to heaven” and on which “the angels of God were ascending and descending” (Gen 28:12).

# Jesus Is the One Mediator between God and Man

- Since Jesus is the bridge between God and man, He is the one perfect mediator between the two. A perfect mediator should incorporate within Himself both poles that are to be reconciled to each other.
- 1 Timothy 2:5: “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”

# Jesus Is the One Mediator between God and Man

“We must seek a mediator who is not only human, but also divine, in order that, by the intervention of His blessed mortality, men may be led from their mortal misery to a blessed immortality.”

- Augustine, *The City of God* 9.15, in *The City of God, Books VIII–XVI*, trans. G. G. Walsh & G. Monahan, FC 14 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1952), 99.

# The Incarnation Gives Us a Perfect Prophet

- Jesus says to Philip in John 14:9–10: “He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.”

# The Incarnation Gives Us a Perfect Priest

- To perfectly reconcile man and God, a perfect priest must offer a sacrifice more pleasing than sin is displeasing, and He must be able to sanctify those on behalf of whom the sacrifice is offered. Only the Word incarnate can offer a sacrifice of this kind, offering Himself as a victim of infinite value that is more pleasing than all sin is displeasing, and blessing us with His grace.

# The Incarnation Gives Us a Perfect Priest

- Since the mission of the priest is to reconcile man and God through sacrifice, a perfect priest must have a maximum unity with the victim offered by him, with God to whom he offers sacrifice, and with the people on behalf of whom he offers sacrifice.
- This unity is perfectly realized by the Word incarnate, for He offers Himself to His Father with whom He is one in divinity, on behalf of humanity, with whom He has made Himself one.

# The Incarnation Gives Us a Perfect King

- The Word incarnate is the one perfect king, exercising divine authority in His own person, while being one with His subjects in humanity, whom He leads by example to the perfection of mercy and justice.
- The Word incarnate is the new Head of mankind, restoring Adam's failed headship.