

## INCARNATION: A YALE BIBLE STUDY

### Love Came Down Imagining Incarnation with Dr. Allen Hilton

Merriam-Webster SINCE 1828

GAMES | BROWSE THESAURUS | WORD OF THE DAY | WORDS AT PLAY

incarnation

Dictionary Thesaurus

# incarnation noun

 Save Word

in·car·na·tion | \,in-(.)kär-'nā-shən  \

### Definition of *incarnation*

- 1 : the act of incarnating : the state of being incarnate
- 2 : a particular physical form or state : VERSION  
*//* in another *incarnation* he might be a first vice-president  
— Walter Teller  
*//* TV and movie *incarnations* of the story
- 3 **a** : a concrete or actual form of a quality or concept  
*especially* : a person showing a trait or typical character to a marked degree  
*//* she is the *incarnation* of goodness
- b** (1) *capitalized* : the union of divinity with humanity in Jesus Christ  
(2) : the embodiment of a deity or spirit in some earthly form

In our three Incarnation sessions together, we've been exploring, relishing, embracing the claim that the God of the universe entered history through the human life of Jesus of Nazareth. Matthew and Luke make that claim through birth stories and their match with the words, wonders, and lived life of the grown-up Jesus. John makes it directly when he proclaims that the divine Word of creation "became flesh and lived among us" and then backs it up with the signs, self-identification, and glory-radiating death of Jesus (Incidentally, we could have done this with the Gospel of Mark, too.)

That's a lot to do! Congratulations on some awfully good reading and thinking!

Now two things remain for us:

1. To trace out that theme through the rest of the New Testament and across Christian history.
2. To do the theological and philosophical work of asking what it means to claim that God became human.

We need a session to get our head and heart around incarnation, so let's read!

### **Incarnation in the NT**

Two things to recognize together as we begin:

1. The claim of incarnation doesn't stop with the last word of John's Gospel. It winds its way through the 27 books of the New Testament.
2. These multiple claims picture incarnation variously, so nuance becomes a category for us.

To put the data in play, let's make our way through key passages, then we'll compare and contrast the picture they paint

### ***The Passages***

Below is a list of a very uncomprehensive, but representative list of incarnation-related passages outside Matthew, Luke, and John.

#### Mark

The second Gospel never says outright that Jesus is God. Its favorite title is "Son of God" which it asserts at the beginning (with Mark's announcement that his Gospel is "the beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" – 1.1) and end (with the centurion's recognition at the foot of the cross, "Surely this man is the Son of God." – 15.39) Between those two claims God himself (baptism and transfiguration – 1.11 and 9.7) confirm this status.

If Mark doesn't have Jesus or any character claim that Jesus is God, there are nonetheless insinuations. For example...

- Before Jesus heals a paralyzed man, he forgives that man's sins, to which the ruffled scribes respond, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (2.7)
- When Pharisees confront Jesus and his disciples for picking grain on the Sabbath, Jesus replies: Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." (2.27-28)
- When Jesus calms the storm, his disciples are flummoxed: "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" (4.41)

This list is not comprehensive, but it gives a taste of Mark's theme.

### The Letters of Paul

Preachers quote poetry. It happens a lot, because the beauty and illustrative value work for many congregants. The Apostle Paul was a pastor and a preacher. In his letter to the church in Philippi, Pastor Paul wants that community to come together, instead of splintering, under the pressure they're receiving from their neighbors in town. (1.28) So to illustrate the attitudes and actions that will help them to stay close and unified, Preacher Paul quotes an early Christian hymn that he and they have probably sung together. In it, we hear of a God-equal Jesus.

*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*

*Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own  
advantage;  
rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature<sup>[b]</sup> of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!*

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2.5-11)*

Here the pre-Bethlehem Christ is God-equal (Gk ISOS) and has God's nature or form (MORPHE). The attitude of emptying self for others could not be better embodied, and through Paul's pastoral need, you and I get access to another claim of incarnation.

Phil 2 is Paul's most blatant statement of the deity of Christ, but it is not alone. Here are a couple others that join it:

*Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen. (Romans 9.5)*

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. (Colossians 1.5)*

*For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. (Colossians 2.9-10)*

In these three letters, in brief moments, Paul presents Jesus as God in human form.

### The General Letters

We began our class session one week with my pathetic musical rendition of Hebrews 1 from the all church cantata of my youth: "God, who at sundry times and in divers manner spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his son." Here's the NIV for that verse and the

*In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. (Hebrews 1.1-4)*

The parallels to John 1 in this passage are clear, with this being the one through whom all things were made and with radiance and glory being the obvious outcome of putting God in flesh.

Not surprisingly, the first letter of John also picks up the theme.

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. (1 John 1.1)*

The “from the beginning” bit sounds very much like the “In the beginning...” of John 1, doesn’t it?

The Book of Revelation works in a different mode than any other NT book. The paints on this palette are apocalyptic and the main communication of theology comes through symbols rather than claims. It’s not clear what we are to make of the Lamb in the midst of the throne, but here’s the passage:

*Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits<sup>[a]</sup> of God sent out into all the earth. <sup>7</sup> He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. <sup>8</sup> And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s people. <sup>9</sup> And they sang a new song, saying:*

*“You are worthy to take the scroll*

*and to open its seals,*

*because you were slain,*

*and with your blood you purchased for God*

*persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.*

*<sup>10</sup> You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign<sup>[b]</sup> on the earth.”*

John the Seer is clearly and committedly Jewish-Christian in his conception. The fact that angels fall down before the Lamb in worship may be his clearest claim that Jesus is divine.

A final word about how to array these relative to one another – especially in the context of other NT passages.

Some Bible scholars and theologians have posited a developmental history to the doctrine of the incarnation. Their logic is that the disciples themselves surely didn’t perceive Jesus as God when they walked around with them, but gradually escalated their claims and understanding over time and reflection and in response to the needs of their churches, claiming that it developed slowly and only came to fulness in the Gospel of John (late 1<sup>st</sup> century).

These interpreters point to passages that hint at development.

- In Romans 1.4, Paul seems to quote another early Christian statement (creed?) that came before him. In that verse, he translates, “[Jesus]...who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead.” This seems to some to indicate that Jesus became Son of God at the resurrection – not a declaration but a qualification for deity.

- In Peter’s Pentecost sermon of Acts 2, he says, “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.” Some read this, as they read Romans 1.4, as a promotion of status.

These theories trip a bit on Philippians 2, which seems to have even preceded Paul by a few years, putting it around 50 AD. But they point to the possibility that even Paul is able to range in the way he thinks about this, without worry of self-contradiction.

On the other end of the spectrum of New Testament thought lie some voices who hesitate to count Jesus fully human. The 2nd Letter of John, for example, worries about this sort of belief.

*I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. (v. 7)*

This point of view was later dubbed “Docetism” after the Greek word for “to seem” (DOKEO), because they held that Jesus only appeared/seemed to take flesh.

Over time, of course, the variety multiplied even further. We call these contending views of who Jesus was “Christology” and in time some of them became known as “Christological heresies.” (See a sample summary from the Evangelical Free tradition at the end of this handout.) The different perspectives are a window for us to a time when people were working hard on the logistics and philosophy of incarnation.

### ***The Church Beyond the New Testament***

So, what does all of this mean? It’s well enough to quote all of these passages from scripture to assert the divinity of Christ and the incarnation of God. It’s another thing to push the concept. It became the work of on-the-ground churches, both in the New Testament period and beyond, to reflect on the question.

One form of the question asks when Jesus knew what and when he could do what. Was he somehow like Athena – full-grown from the head of Zeus and therefore always possessed of powers? Or did Jesus have to learn and grow along the way?

The most entertaining and in some ways crudest – though moving – expression of their imaginings came in fanciful episodes of 2<sup>nd</sup> Century gospel writers who asked what a God-in-flesh being looks like as a kid. Their answer looks a little too much like Disney’s “Hercules” – divine power in immature human form is clumsy. Here’s an example from the Infancy Gospel of James

The 2<sup>nd</sup>-century Infancy Gospel of Thomas, for example, reveals both the wondrous power and the yet-immature instincts of this child, when an everyday squabble between two kids playing...turns fatal.

*After that again he went through the village, and a child ran and dashed against his shoulder. And Jesus was provoked and said unto him: Thou shalt not finish thy course (lit. go all thy way). And immediately he fell down and died. But certain when they saw what was done said: Whence was this young child born, for that every word of his is an accomplished work? And the parents of him that was dead came unto Joseph, and blamed him, saying: Thou that hast such a child canst not dwell with us in the village: or do thou teach him to bless and not to curse: for he slayeth our children. (4.1-2)*

What is a parent to do?! Usually such offenses require an apology, but there's no use apologizing to a dead playmate. Joseph and Mary were mortified and worried about their standing in the neighborhood, so they chased their son down and made him make things right.

*Joseph arose and took hold upon his ear and wrung it sore. 3 And the young child was wroth and said unto him: It sufficeth thee (or them) to seek and not to find, and verily thou hast done unwisely: knowest thou not that I am thine? vex me not. (5.2-3)*

Good stuff, this! Later in the book, Jesus will (apparently wrongly) be accused of pushing his playmate off the second-story balcony. This time he'll hustle down and fix things by raising him from the dead. (9.1-3)

Elsewhere, the boy Jesus shows great wisdom among the teachers. In the passage below, he reveals the heart for the poor that we see in the grown-up Jesus of the NT Gospels.

*Again, in the time of sowing the young child went forth with his father to sow wheat in their land: and as his father sowed, the young child Jesus sowed also one corn of wheat. And he reaped it and threshed it and made thereof an hundred measures (cors): and he called all the poor of the village unto the threshing floor and gave them the wheat. And Joseph took the residue of the wheat. And he was eight years old when he wrought this sign. (12.1-2)*

The popular imaginings of a God-in-flesh-as-a-kid are a mixed bag of developed wisdom and unruly power. They are very entertaining!

The more intellectual versions of the Christological quest took shape over time, as what had been scattered and various pictures of Jesus' divinity worked their way toward orthodox pronouncements. The 5<sup>th</sup>-century Christian church grappled with the metaphysical mechanics of the claim of Christ's divinity. As the variety of beliefs multiplied, they felt the need to state a standard, and so the Chalcedonian Council came up with a shared formula which would define orthodoxy. Notice the close attention to how divine and human can share the same body and how words like substance ("consubstantial" and "one Subsistence"), nature ("two natures").

Also, the translation comes from a time when “man” meant “human” ...sort of, so we’ll have to do the inclusion work on our own. Here’s their report:

*We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,*

- *the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood;*
- *truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body;*
- *consubstantial with us according to the manhood;*
- *in all things like unto us, without sin;*
- *begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the virgin Mary, the mother of God, according to the manhood;*
- *one and the same Christ, Son, Lord,*
- *Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son,*
- *and only begotten,*
- *God the Word,*
- *the Lord Jesus Christ*

*as the prophets from the beginning have declared concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.* (<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds2.iv.i.iii.html>)

Through the ages, these words have formed a constant with and against which generations of Christians have defined their/our beliefs about what God-in-flesh means.

### **A Modern Problem**

When the Council of Chalcedon met, the universe was imagined as a radiation of concentric circles extending outward from the earth (at the center) to God’s realm at the outer sphere. Here’s a 16<sup>th</sup>-century drawing from Peter Apian’s *Cosmographia*:



Schema huius præmissæ diuisionis Sphærarum .



Geocentric celestial spheres; Peter Apian's *Cosmographia* (Antwerp, 1539)

The ancients believed that each sphere was comprised of a wholly different stuff or substance (as a crass analogy, think Moon = Cheese). To get to the point for us, that means that God’s sphere is made of different stuff/substance than the earthly sphere where humans get our material form. When the churchmen of Chalcedon use the word “substance” and the word “nature” they’re operating within this worldview. To imagine a God-in-flesh, they have to figure out how God-stuff and human-stuff – think cheese and chalk – can co-exist in one being.

To understate, we don't think that way anymore. Substance isn't quite the same concept as it was then. But that just moves the question a bit. How do we, with a 21<sup>st</sup>-century, science-informed worldview, imagine a divine human?

My favorite modern solution to the puzzle comes from Austin Farrer, who was a friend of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and the others ("The Inklings") who shared pints at the Eagle and Child in Oxford. He was also a chaplain and philosophical theologian who took seriously the challenge of answering contemporary skeptics by translating classic Christian belief into modern terms.

For Farrer, the modern mind thinks not in terms of physical substance, but of will. In his theology, God is constantly appealing to human will – through scripture, spiritual nudges, promptings, conscience – and each human faces the fairly constant task of answering yes or no to them. Farrer calls this model "dual agency" – God's will lived out whenever humans consent. We consent, of course, to various degrees.

- Some almost never consent to God's will – don't help the person across the street, don't give to that charity, don't oppose an unjust law, don't do anything appreciable to bring the will of God into the human sphere.
- Others say "Yes!" a lot. These regularly consent to the promptings or conscience as a matter of principle and habit. We call some of them saints.

In this context, there is space to define what the divinity of Christ might mean: Jesus is the only person who has ever consented to God's will 100%. The Ven diagram features complete overlap.

This picture works for me. What works for you?

## **A Final Word**

The incarnation is a mystery. We'll probably not "get" it completely until we reach the other side. But spending these four Mondays with you visiting the mystery in the Gospels and grappling with it in this session has been an absolute joy for me. God bless you as you walk these remaining days to Bethlehem where, as the hymnist puts incarnation, "Love Came Down at Christmas."

## **Christological Heresies**

[Greg Strand](#)

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Source: <https://www.efca.org/blog/understanding-scripture/christological-heresies>

The past couple of days we have looked at the Chalcedonian Creed, and what is both explicitly affirmed and implicitly denied in the Creed. Below I am repeating the implicit, heretical denials from yesterday. Today we are going to do an exercise with them. Consider this a quiz.

Bearing in mind the orthodox truth of Jesus being “one Person, two natures,” the Person Jesus Christ is both fully and truly God and fully and truly man, go through the specific heresies below and determine the specific error – is it regarding His Person or natures? I have removed the parenthetical explanations from yesterday and included answers at the conclusion of this post.

1. Against the **Docetists** it declared that the Lord Jesus Christ was perfect in manness, truly man, consubstantial with us (*homoousion*, not *homoiousion*, i.e. he is not of “like substance or being” with us, but he is “of the *same* substance” with us) according to manness and born of Mary.
2. Against the **Samosatian adoptionists** it insisted upon the personal subsistence of the Logos “begotten of the Father before the ages.”
3. Against the **Sabellians** it distinguished the Son from the Father both by the titles of “Father” and “Son” and by its reference to the Father having begotten the Son before all ages.
4. Against the **Arians** it affirmed that the Lord Jesus Christ was perfect in deity, truly God, and consubstantial with the Father (*homoousion*, not *homoiousion*, i.e. he is not of “like substance or being” with the Father, but he is “of the *same* substance” with the Father). (An earlier version of this was known as **Ebionism**.)
5. Against the **Apollinarians**, who had reduced Jesus’ manness to a body and an “animal soul” (*psyche alogos*), it declared that Jesus had a “rational soul” (*psyche logike*), that is, a “spirit.”
6. Against the **Nestorians** it both described Mary as *theotokos*, i.e. the God-bearer (not *Christotokos*, i.e. the Christ bearer, emphasizing that Mary bore the man Jesus, undermining that she actually bore the *God*-man Jesus) not in order to exalt Mary in the slightest, but in order to affirm Jesus’ true deity and the fact of a real incarnation, and spoke throughout of *one* and the *same* Son and *one* person and *one* subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons and whose natures are *in union* without division and without separation.
7. Finally, against the **Eutychians** it confessed that in Christ were *two* natures without confusion and without change, the property of each nature being preserved and concurring in the one person.

**Docetists** denied the humanity of Jesus, He only appeared to be human.

**Samosatian adoptionists** denied the deity of Jesus but claim that at some point in His life He was “adopted” by God to this unique role of divine sonship.

**Sabellians** denied the unique Person of Jesus as the second Person of the Trinity (in speaking of Jesus Christ, the orthodox position is “one Person, two natures”; in speaking of the Trinity, the orthodox position is that “there is one God, God eternally exists as three Persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – each Person is fully God”).

**Arians** denied the deity of Jesus, though he is the greatest of created beings.

**Ebionists** denied the deity of Jesus, concluding this would be polytheistic.

**Apollinarians** denied the full humanity of Jesus, concluding Jesus had a human body but a divine mind and spirit.

**Nestorians** denied that Jesus is one Person, concluding He consisted of two separate persons, human and divine.

**Eutychians** denied that Jesus had two natures, concluding that the human nature was absorbed by the divine nature, thus creating a third kind of nature.

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