



NOTES ON THE INCARNATION

Bob Koivisto

In Eternity past, prior to creation, God was all there was. Just God! The blessed Trinity---Father, Son and Holy Spirit---existed together in uninterrupted fellowship. As part of the Divine Union, that little one born in the manger 2,000 years ago did not have His beginning in the Bethlehem stable.

Giovanni Pappini writes in *The Story of the Christ*: “Jesus was born in a stable. A stable—a real stable—is not the bright and graceful portico that Christian painters have imagined as the birthplace of the Son of David. As if ashamed that their God should have rested amidst poor and unclean surroundings.A real stable is the abode of cattle, the prison house of those animals that labor for man. The real stable is dark, dirty and evil smelling; nothing in it is clean save the manger, where the master prepares the forage.....Grass and flowers, dry grasses and flowers that are still scented, lie in the manger, to appease the hunger of the servants of man. The cattle slowly curl their thick, black lips about the hay, and in due course the flower-decked meadow, transformed, returns to light up again the straw that forms their bed.

In such a stable as this Jesus was born. The dirtiest spot on earth was to be the first dwelling-place of the only Pure One, born of woman. The Son of Man, destined to be devoured by beasts bearing the name of men, was first cradled in the manger wherein animals feed upon the marvelous blossoms of spring.

Nor was it by chance that Jesus was born in a stable. Is the world anything else than a huge stable wherein man devours and emits? The most beautiful, the purest and most divine things—does not man by some infernal alchemy transform them into what is loathsome? And when he had done this he stretches himself upon the remains of his own creation, and he calls that ‘enjoying life’.

In this temporary pigsty of a world, whose dirt no trimmings and perfumes can conceal, Jesus appeared one night, born of a stainless virgin, armed with naught his own innocence.”

Bethlehem was not the beginning of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Most Christians have no trouble accepting that God is an eternal being, but many however, are surprised to discover that the Christ of the Gospels is an eternal being. Some really do believe that it all began in Bethlehem. Both Old and New Testaments shout the eternity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus spoke of His eternal relationship with the Father:

John 17:5

5"And now, glorify Thou Me together with Thyself, Father, with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was.

John writes about the eternal existence of the Son:

John 1:1-2

1In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

2He was in the beginning with God.

The very prophetic passage that describes the place of his entrance into the world describes His eternal nature:

Micah 5:2

2"But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, {too} little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity."

Another prophetic passage describing His two comings speaks of His eternal nature:

Isa 9:6

6For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

Everlasting Father is an idiom just like father of knowledge means intelligent or father of glory means glorious. So Eternal Father means: the Father or Author of Eternity.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit being co-equal and co-eternal had fellowship together and made decisions together from eternity past. Together, they had been working out the eternal plan of salvation and the incarnation when one of them would come to earth as a man. Just a reminder, the word incarnation means, "in flesh".

Eph 1:4-5

4just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love

5He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,

Ps 2:7

7I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.

1 Pet 1:18-21

20For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you

21who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

There can be little doubt that the Savior was in fellowship with the Father and the Holy Spirit planning for our salvation from eternity past. But what about His work and ministry on earth prior to his arrival in the manger of Bethlehem?

Though we anticipate the celebration of His birth, we must look backward to understand the outworking of the eternal plan of salvation and the incarnation. We need to look at the preincarnate Lord Jesus Christ to see why he had to be born in the stable in Bethlehem. Dr. Charles Ryrie points out "if Christ came into existence at His birth, then no eternal Trinity exists.....if Christ was not preexistent then He lied, because He claimed to be."

Jesus often spoke of His eternity to those around Him. A good example is found in John Chapter 8.

John 8:56-59

56"Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw {it} and was glad."

57The Jews therefore said to Him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?"

58Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am."

59Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself, and went out of the temple.

Of course, the Jews were acting on the prescribed penalty for blasphemy in the Old Testament, death by stoning. The Lord Jesus was saying he never came into being at a point of time, for He always existed.

We have looked at a few passages which tell us of the preexistence of the Son in eternity and of his fellowship and planning with the Father and the Spirit.

The Lord Jesus Christ, in addition to being part of the Eternal Trinity of God was also responsible for the creation of all things.

Heb 1:1-2

1 God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways,

2 in these last days has spoken to us in {His} Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.

John MacArthur says: "Jesus Christ is responsible for creating not only the physical earth but also time, space, force, action, and matter.....and Christ made it all without effort".

When the space-time universe came into being, Christ, the divine Word was already in a loving face to face relationship with God.

John 1:1-3

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

2 He was in the beginning with God.

3 All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

Col 1:16-17

16 For by Him all things were created, {both} in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things have been created by Him and for Him.

17 And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

Gen 1:26

26 Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

The Lord Jesus Christ began His personal participation, with a hands on approach at the creation of all things and He continues of course as that energizing force that keeps the atoms spinning in their orbits.

Up until now, we have taken a brief glimpse at the preexistence of the Lord Jesus Christ, His fellowship in the Godhead, and His part in the creation of all things. But we must stop and ask, why did he say that Abraham saw His day? What other work did He do before He came to the Bethlehem stable?

May I suggest that a door was opened into history, and through it stepped the Lord Jesus Christ as the preincarnate one, The Angel of the Lord. He was like a ray of sunlight piercing the clouds, as He stepped out of Eternity and into the affairs of men in order to select out certain human beings to accomplish the Eternal Plan of God. The Lord Jesus Christ Himself was personally responsible for intervening in the lives of Bible characters as he personally revealed the plan and purpose of God and directed the traffic of History.

These appearances of Christ in the Old Testament are called Theophanies. This is a Greek word meaning "appearances of God". The main theophany in the Old Testament is the Lord Jesus Christ as the Angel of The Lord. And the meaning of angel as we all know means messenger or envoy. I believe that it is quite clear from examining the Scriptures, that the Preincarnate Christ was on earth with men as The Angel of The Lord.

Three facts will help us to understand the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ before the manger.

1. The Angel of the Lord is called Yaweh.

2. Even though He is called Yaweh, He is also distinct from Yaweh.

3. By process of elimination the angel must be Yaweh.

When the Angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in the burning bush He said of Himself: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob". Exodus 3:6 What did Moses do? He hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. As you know, the Angel appeared to Moses to commission him to lead the Jews out of Egypt. In verse thirteen, Moses addressed the Angel as God and Angel said His name was "I am". The Angel whom Moses met was divine. In that great moment of confrontation with the Jewish leaders in John chapter 8, Jesus identifies Himself as that very one whom Moses met in the burning bush. And the Jews understood clearly what He meant as He identified Himself as the Divine "I AM." They sought to kill Him for His claim to Deity.

In Genesis 22 where God instructs Abraham in how to sacrifice his son Isaac, the Angel of the Lord and God are identified as the same one.

In Genesis 28:13 Jacob fell asleep in the place he named Bethel. In the dream, Yaweh said to him, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac....." Some time later, the Angel of the Lord appeared to Jacob and said in 31:13 "I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you make a vow to me....."

When the Angel introduced Himself to Manoah and his sterile wife in Judges 13, He said His name was "Wonderful", (the Hebrew here is "Felah" and it means full of wonder or amazement or hidden treasure) the same word used to describe Messiah in Isaiah 9:6. And then in verse 22 of the same chapter, Manoah said: "We have seen God". Remember the words of John: "No man has seen God at any time: the only begotten..... He has declared Him."

In all and in the many places where the Angel of the Lord appears, He demonstrates that He has all the attributes of Deity: Omniscience, Omnipresence, and Omnipotence. In Exodus 23:21 the Angel had the authority to forgive sins, and Yaweh's name was in Him. In Joshua 5:14, He received worship, and in Judges 13:19-23, He accepted sacrifices from people.

I think there is little doubt that the Angel of The Lord was divine. But was the Angel an appearance of the triune God, or perhaps the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit?

Actually, the Angel is seen as distinct from Yaweh. In Zechariah 1:12, The Angel of Yaweh intercedes with Yaweh on behalf of the people of Jerusalem and Judah. One person of the Trinity intercedes with another person of the Trinity. Later in Zechariah 3:12 the Angel of Yaweh is seen calling on Yaweh on behalf of Joshua the high priest. Something very similar is seen in John 17 in Christ's high priestly prayer and in Hebrews 7:25 where Christ ever lives to make intercession for us and He is also described as the one who intercedes in 1st John 2:1. In a Trinitarian view of God, it is not unusual for one member of the Godhead to call upon another. Both Old and New Testaments, of course, are full of examples of several members of the Godhead conversing with one another.

Ron Rhodes in his book, Christ Before The Manger, suggests there are six reasons why Jesus Christ is the Angel of Yaweh.

1. Jesus Christ is the visible God of the New Testament. Neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit manifest themselves visibly. Even though the Father's voice is heard from heaven and the Spirit descends like a dove, The Son is the visible manifestation of God. "The Word became flesh and dwelled among us". It seems logical that the role of the second person of the Trinity is to appear visibly in both testaments. Paul clearly says the Father is invisible and lives in "unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see....". John says:..."no one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made Him known." John 1:18

In John 5:37 Jesus Himself says, that "you have never heard his voice nor seen His form....", speaking of the Father.

The Holy Spirit is invisible by definition. Jesus said in John 14 in the upper room that the Spirit who is invisible indwells believers. And in John 3, the Spirit is compared to the wind, known only by effect.

Who else could the visible manifestations of God in the Old Testament be but the preincarnate Lord Jesus Christ?

2. Both in Old and New Testaments the Angel of The Lord and The Lord Jesus Christ are sent by the Father.

3. Both in Old and New Testament the Angel of The Lord and The Lord Jesus Christ interceded to God the Father.

4. The Angel of the Lord no longer appears after the incarnation. He literally disappears from the pages of Scripture. The Angel of the Lord, the divine one has become the God-man Savior. We read of “an angel” of the Lord, but not “the angel”.

5. The appearances of the Angel of The Lord in the Old Testament are similar to the appearance of The Lord Jesus Christ in Revelation. 1:14

Rev 1:14

14And His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire;

Rev 1:16

16And in His right hand He held seven stars; and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength.

6. Christ and The Angel of The Lord had amazingly similar ministries. They interceded, revealed truth, lead Israel, commissioned people for service, comforted the brokenhearted, delivered those in bondage, protected God’s servants, and judged sin.

Who else could the Angel be but the Lord Jesus Christ?

With all these appearances in the Old Testament, the stage was now set for God to enter Human History . It was clear from the beginning that the Redeemer must be human himself and not just a Great Angelic Being. Even with His power and greatness and divine attributes, the one great work was impossible until God entered the human race. That one great work was that of forgiveness and redemption. The Virgin birth, first foretold in Genesis 3:15 made clear that the “seed of the woman” must enter into conflict with the “serpent”.

Gen 3:15

15And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel."

Hebrews 2:14-18 make the issue very clear, God must do what had never been done before, He must become a man to redeem man.

Heb 2:14-18

14Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil;

15and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.

16For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham.

17Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

18For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.

In order to redeem those who were slaves to sin

John 8:34

34 Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.

By the virgin birth, one Man in all of history, was born outside of sin's slavemarket. Because He was free, He was qualified to pay the price and because he was God, he could afford to. Redemption required the work of a perfect human being. An angel could not do it. As the writer to Hebrews says: "Unto which of the angels did He say?....." "Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee."

Into that Bethlehem stable was born God's perfect man and man's perfect God. Absolute humanity and undiminished Deity united in one person forever. The God-man savior.

J.I.Packer put it this way: "He was no less God then (in the incarnation) than before; but He had begun to be man. He was not now God minus some elements of His deity, but God plus all that He had made His own by taking manhood to Himself. He who made man was now learning what it felt like to be man."

Was this a great experiment? Was God risking all on an untested program? Was there a chance of failure? The human child is the most utterly dependent creature in all the animal kingdom. He has no survival skills, no useful instincts; dependent, needy, subject to danger, so delicate and this Child was in the care of an inexperienced teen-aged mother. And yet it must be so. God must become man in order to rescue His creation.

The Scripture says: that Jesus grew in stature and wisdom before God and men. It says He learned obedience by the things He suffered. He was tempted in all points like we, yet without sin. Was His temptation real? I mean was there the real possibility He could sin? Was He only a Divine Robot. How real were His struggles? He humbled Himself when He left heaven's glory. He wept for the lost of Israel. He suffered at the hands of Pontius Pilate. He was thirsty during His execution. He Died on the cross.

His humanness was real and his hurt was real and his suffering was real. The writer to the Hebrews says: "He is able to sympathize with our weaknesses".

Permit me to quote a few paragraphs from a Christmas meditation entitled Gift wrapping God by Mary Ellen Ashcroft:

We wreath our doors with juniper and holly, deck our shrubs with tiny white lights and our living rooms with spruce trees, candles, Nativity scenes. We dress ourselves for Christmas: she sporting a cotton sweater with stars and snowflakes, he wearing a candy-caned tie, baby-kicking green and red socks with tiny bells.

Ironic, all of this decking, when you consider that the Christmas movement of God is away from glitter and glory. To get ready for Christmas, God undressed.

God stripped off his finery and appeared- how embarrassing- naked on the day he was born. God rips off medals of rank, puts aside titles, honors, and talents, and appears in his birthday suit. Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate deity. In the incarnation, things heavenly and earthly are gathered into one: one in the naked flesh and folds of God.....

God could not be God-with-us if he wasn't flesh. The flesh of the baby is father of the flesh of the man. In his flesh, the spit of God mixed with the dirt of Galilee to make a healing paste. The naked baby must be flesh so that God can be stripped again, trading his dusty garments for the splinters of the cross.

The true Christmas story scares us spittleless. If God undressed, we might have to join him--remove our self-sufficiency suits, pull off our health and well being designer sweats. Perhaps instead of shopping we need to spend December reminding ourselves of God's choice of vulnerability and pondering its implications. Perhaps we need to call December 25th the Celebration on the Incarnation, to greet each other with Incarnation greetings--instead of happy holidays or merry Christmas we could shout, God chose flesh....God became one of us !

The Feast of the Incarnation is the time to dance to the descending scales of God throwing off omnipotence. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us--God closer than close. That's what we could be celebrating. This is the Christmas story as it should be told. This naked God is the path to God.

The meaning of the incarnation (when God took on flesh) was clear in His first words as a baby. We pretend our children can talk when they are four months old. Jesus could talk when He was born.

Heb 10:5-9

5Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, "Sacrifice and offering Thou hast not desired, but a body Thou hast prepared for me;

6In whole burnt offerings and {sacrifices} for sin Thou hast taken no pleasure.

7"Then I said, 'Behold, I have come (in the roll of the book it is written of me) to do Thy will, O God.'"

8After saying above, "Sacrifices and offerings and whole burnt offerings and {sacrifices} for sin Thou hast not desired, nor hast Thou taken pleasure {in them} (which are offered according to the Law),

9then He said, "Behold, I have come to do Thy will." He takes away the first in order to establish the second.

Can you imagine, as a baby, being conscious of such a responsibility, at the same time having a dirty diaper and knowing in advance all the problems and stresses of 2nd grade and being a teenager and having disciples and going to the cross and judging the world?

Through the miracle of the virgin birth, the eternal Son reached out and took to Himself a true and complete humanity without diminishing his essential deity. He united deity and humanity inseparably and eternally in one person. As a physical descendant of David through both His mother and father, he was qualified to sit on the throne of David as David's greater Son. As a Jew, of the Tribe of Judah, he fulfilled the promises made to Abraham for He was the promised Seed. As the Son of Man He was the Messiah who would bring redemption. As the last Adam He would now head a new race of men. As the God-man Savior He could now be mediator between heaven and earth.

Let us conclude with the words of Giovanni Pappini again: After the animals came their guardians. Even had the angels failed to announce to them the great event of the Nativity, they would nevertheless have hastened to the stable to see the child of the strange woman.

Shepherds usually dwell apart and in remote regions, and have no knowledge of the doings of the outside world and its festivities. They are interested in any incident, however trifling, that occurs in their neighborhood. During the long winter night of the solstice, while watching their flocks they had been startled by a sudden brightness in the sky and the sound of angel voices. And when, in the dim light of the stable, they perceived the young and lovely woman mutely contemplating her newborn child, when they saw the Babe whose eyes had but now opened upon the world, and saw His rosy delicate flesh, His mouth that as yet had never tasted food, their hearts melted within them with tenderness. A birth, the birth of a human being, of a soul that is but now become incarnate, that is come to suffer among other souls, is always a miracle so full of pain as to move to compassion even the simplest, those even who are incapable of fully understanding its mystery. And to those men who had received a message this new-born infant was not an unknown being, not a child like any other, but 'The Child' to whose coming their suffering race had looked forward through the long ages."

The same angel who revealed the coming Messiah to Daniel announced to Mary that she was to be the mother of the Savior. Gabriel said His name would be Jesus and that He would be great and Son of the Most High. He would have the throne of his father David and would reign over the house of Jacob forever and His kingdom would never end. Gabriel cleared up Mary's confusion when he said that the Holy Spirit's supernatural work in Mary's body would enable Christ--the eternal God--to take on a human nature. From the production of the

egg in Mary's ovary, to the actual birth, the fetal state of Mary's womb was entirely under the controlling, sanctifying ministry of the Holy Spirit. All three persons of the Trinity were involved in the process. The Father prepared the human body (Heb. 10:5). The Holy Spirit was the agent of the incarnation (Lk.1:35) and the Messiah took upon Himself flesh and blood (Heb.2:14).

Joseph, the reluctant bridegroom, learned that He would become step-father to The Savior. The angel told him to name him Jesus. He would save His people from their sins.

The angel announced to the couple that the coming of their child would mean life to all people.

The shepherds learned that a savior had been born who was Christ the Lord. The very one whom these angels had known and served for so long had been born as a human being—a tiny babe in Bethlehem. When they saw Him they were amazed.

When Simeon saw Jesus He took Him in his arms and said:

Luke 2:29-32

29"Now Lord, Thou dost let Thy bond-servant depart In peace, according to Thy word;

30For my eyes have seen Thy salvation,

31Which Thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples,

32A light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel."

Simeon recognized the babe as the one who would bring salvation to the world; he knew that Jesus was the Christ.

The Prophetess Anna who had given herself to worship and fasting and prayer in the temple was waiting for the Messiah.

Luke 2:36-38

36And there was a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with a husband seven years after her marriage,

37and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. And she never left the temple, serving night and day with fasting and prayers.

38And at that very moment she came up and {began} giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

She knew she was in the presence of the promised one.

Jesus was visited by the wise men from the east who had seen his star. When they saw Him, they bowed down and worshiped Him. They gave Him gifts fit for a king.

His incarnation was not temporary. It was not the welding of two natures to be separated again at His death and resurrection. He was raised in the same body in which he died. He ascended into heaven in the same body in which he was resurrected. He will return in the same body in which He ascended. He remains forever as the God-man Savior interceding to the Father on our behalf.

The baby of Bethlehem wasn't just a visitor to the planet or to His human nature. He became one of us. He sits at the Father's right hand, waiting for that "great event" in which He will claim His own and reclaim the world. Once he was here as the Divine Messenger, The Lord's Angel, and entering into the affairs of His children and revealing the will of the Father. As the Angel of the Lord, the world had a preview:

John 1:16

16For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace.

We had a glimpse at the Eternal One, The Angel of the Lord, in those "grace moments" of history which really is HisStory. The Angel could do all things except save mankind. At Bethlehem, He became permanently one of us; to live, to die, to intercede, and to come again. Thank you Lord Jesus that you once came to visit but you have now come to stay.

1 Tim 2:5

5For there is one God, {and} one mediator also between God and men, {the} man Christ Jesus,