

How Bright Appears the Morning Star

Philipp Nicolai (1556–1608); tr. William Mercer (1811–1873)

How bright appears the Morning Star,
with mercy beaming from afar;
the host of heav'en rejoices.
O Righteous Branch, O Jesse's Rod,
the Son of Man and Son of God,
we too will lift our voices:
Jesus, Jesus, holy, holy, yet most lowly,
come, draw near us;
great Emmanuel, come and hear us.

Though circled by the hosts on high,
He deigned to cast a pitying eye
upon His helpless creature.
The whole creation's Head and Lord,
by highest seraphim adored,
assumed our very nature;
Jesus, grant us, through Your merit,
to inherit Your salvation.
Hear, O hear our supplication!

Rejoice, O heav'ns, and earth, reply;
with praise, O sinners, fill the sky
for this, His incarnation.
Incarnate God, put forth Your pow'r;
ride on, ride on, great Conqueror,
till all know Your salvation.
Amen, amen! Alleluia, alleluia!
Praise be given
evermore by earth and heaven.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Incarnation and Inculturation

Kevin T. Bauder

The incarnation of Jesus Christ is a fundamental of the gospel. Essential to our salvation is the teaching that the Second Person of the Godhead laid aside his visible divine glory and added to his eternal person a complete human nature. From the annunciation onward God fully entered into the human experience, passing through gestation, birth, nurturing, growth, learning, vocation, temptation, obedience, suffering, and death. In his resurrection and ascension Jesus did not abandon his human nature but glorified it. His human body is now located in heaven, and from heaven this body will return in the air when he catches away his saints and takes them to his Father's house. Jesus Christ is forever divine and human, God and man, two natures joined in one theanthropic person by hypostatic union.

These truths were explored in detail during the early centuries of Christianity. Not all agreed, and those who differed—Docetists, Cerinthians, Arians, Modalists, Adoptionists, Apollinarians, Eutychians, Nestorians, Monophysites, Monothelites, and many others—were understood to be heretics who, denying the essence of the gospel, were genuinely apostate. These teachings were explored in the early rule of faith, then embodied with increasing detail in the great Christian symbols: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and the Formula of Chalcedon.

The true Church confesses the full humanity of Jesus Christ. That humanity is the ground of every Christmas celebration. While we do not understand how God could become a human, we confess and rejoice that he has.

Less often do we stop to think that Jesus was not simply human but a specific man. He was born into a specific earthly family whose names everybody knew. He grew up in a specific town and attended a specific synagogue. He ate specific food, wore specific clothing, washed a specific way, and spoke a specific language—or more than one. In short, Jesus participated in a specific culture.

Jesus was Jewish. His speech, manner of dress, dietary habits, and customs were Jewish customs. Jesus was immersed in and lived his earthly life in accordance with the mores and prescriptions of Jewish culture. That he did so is not incidental but central to his identity and mission.



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900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

While the Jewish leadership of Jesus' day rejected him, the sons of Israel understood many important truths. They knew who God was—not just any fictitious god, but the true and living God, YHWH. Their law taught them the importance of holiness and horror of sin. They knew what a genuine sacrifice was and what it was supposed to do; they understood substitutionary atonement. They grasped important aspects of Israel's role as a people of God. They expected that for Israel to fulfill its role, God would have to send a Messiah. They possessed the scriptures, God's written oracles to humans. All of these factors entered into and shaped Jewish culture, and Jewish culture enabled the Jewish people to grasp what most Gentiles could not.

For example, when John pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold the lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world," his statement made perfect sense to Jewish hearers. They understood what a sacrificial lamb was and they knew how it took sins away. They had been prepared for this knowledge by centuries of lambs being offered in sacrifice. To Jewish people, stating that Jesus was their sacrifice was a perfectly transparent statement. It communicated the gospel.

The same would not be true in every other culture. Telling the Aztecs that Jesus was their sacrifice would have communicated an entirely different message. That message would actually have run contrary to the gospel. In other words, Jewish culture prepared and enabled people to understand the gospel, while Aztec culture (if it still existed) would disable people from understanding it.

This disability is not incorrigible. It would eventually be possible to communicate the gospel to an Aztec. First, however, the moral imagination of the Aztec would have to be furnished with the categories to understand the gospel. Aztecs would have to be disabused of a false notion of sacrifice and introduced to a true image of sacrifice before they could understand what it meant that Christ is their sacrifice.

It is a good thing that cultures are permeable. The values that a culture lacks can be introduced from a foreign culture. Peter traded on this permeability when he presented the gospel to Cornelius. As a Roman centurion, Cornelius was well acquainted with the meaning of crucifixion. By itself, this Roman meaning would have thwarted his understanding of the gospel. But Cornelius was also a student of Judaism. Peter addressed this element of Jewish understanding when he told Cornelius about the death of Jesus, whom, he said, "they slew and hanged on a tree." This distinctively Jewish expression told Cornelius that Jesus suffered the curse of God in his death, even though "God was with him."

Peter did not begin by trying to find ways to translate Christian truths into Gentile categories. He began by offering Cornelius a category that would be nonsensical to most Gentiles, but that Cornelius could grasp because he had

already ventured outside his own culture. Each culture explains reality in its own way. Some of those ways are more compatible with Christian truth and some of them are less. Before he sent his Son into the world, God took nearly two millennia to create a culture with forms, laws, customs, prescriptions, worship, traditions, and patterns of experience that would enable people to understand the person and work of Christ.

All of which underlines the truth that Jesus, as God incarnate, did not merely dip a toe into humanity. He plunged into human nature, fully partaking of all its dimensions, yet without sin. Because he fully participates in our nature, he fully redeems it for those who trust him. That truth is the foundation of peace on earth and goodwill to men. It is truth that puts the *merry* into *Christmas*.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
