

## “BEING GOING TO BE BORN TO MARY”: AN OVERVIEW AND APPRAISAL OF ROBERT W. JENSON’S VIEW OF THE INCARNATION AS AN OT PHENOMENON

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary trinitarian theologians consider it to be a bias of traditional theology to overlook the contribution of the OT in expounding the doctrine of the incarnation.<sup>1</sup> Balmer H. Kelly, for example, argues that in treating this central Christian doctrine, “it would be a healthy development for theology if closer attention were paid to the Old Testament.”<sup>2</sup> Kelly’s rationale is that although the incarnation is “set forth in the New Testament as completely new . . . it is filled with the sounds of the past.”<sup>3</sup> As such, he goes on to explain that the OT “witnesses powerfully to the reality of the Incarnation.”<sup>4</sup>

Other exponents of contemporary trinitarianism, in responding to this oversight, go so far as to attempt to read the OT “incarnationally.”<sup>5</sup> Lutheran theologian Robert W. Jenson, as an example of this trend, observes, “It has been yet another unfortunate legacy of the *Logos*-theology that in construing Christ’s preexistence we jump over the Old Testament.”<sup>6</sup> In developing an incarnational theology from the perspective of the OT, Jenson advocates the view that the Son’s life actually extends “from his *Old Testament preexistence*.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, Jenson views the OT

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<sup>1</sup> By describing a system of theology as “contemporary,” I am referring to a trend to theologize in a way that, for good or bad, modifies the traditional/classical view of God as self-contained (i.e. independent of the world processes) by merging God’s trinitarian nature more closely with history and the world. For a good overview of this relatively recent direction in theology, see Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Balmer H. Kelly, “Word of Promise: The Incarnation in the OT,” *ExAud* 7–8 (1991–1992) 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> This is my terminology, which reflects my understanding of some theologians who attempt to read the incarnation back into the OT. As will become clear later in this paper, I do not have a problem with this method if it means the same thing as reading the OT text “Christologically” (which allows for the concept of a *logos asarkos*). However, by “incarnationally,” I think I also have captured accurately the overall intention of some theologians to find the incarnate Christ everywhere and a pre-incarnate *Logos* nowhere!

<sup>6</sup> Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1: *The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 141.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2: *The Works of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 286 (italics mine). Jenson argues this point as a corollary to his commitment to a God whose “being into its furthest depths is historical.” For Jenson the very essence of God implies his involvement

as playing a pivotal and decisive role in outlining the nature of the Son's preexistence, even more so, surprisingly, than the NT.<sup>8</sup>

By advocating the preexistence of Jesus Christ in the OT, Jenson rejects the traditional interpretation of the Son's "preexistence" that posits an "unincarnate *state* of the Son," and substitutes in its place the concept of the Son's "being going to be born to Mary."<sup>9</sup> In developing the doctrine of the incarnation from this perspective, Jenson suggests the notion of a preexistent incarnational *pattern* in God's life with Israel, his people, over that of a preexistent *person*, namely, the *Logos asarkos*. This approach depicts the incarnation as a historical or narrative "pattern" that anticipates, reveals, and constitutes Jesus' divine-human identity. For Jenson, then, the birth of Jesus in Palestine is only one of several ways in which the incarnation is to be construed. Apparently, Jenson's concept of the Son's incarnation is open to a sort of Hegelian interpretation in that it is understood as having always been true of

in time. This way of interpreting God's being has the overall effect of correlating God and time so closely that God's identity cannot be known otherwise than historically. As Philip Carey observes, Jenson's project seeks to reorient the church's thinking about God in terms of the Biblical story line over against the "depth" metaphors of classical theology which attempt to ground God's being in the depth of some timeless eternity or in the depth of human consciousness (*à la* Augustine). Philip Carey, "A Review Article," *SJT* 52 (1999) 134. Jenson's next move, then, is to identify the preexistent Christ with a *Logos ensarkos* rather than a *Logos asarkos*. The logic is obvious: If God is a historical deity then the *Logos* must have always existed otherwise than as a pretemporal, precreational being. It is this writer's conclusion that Jenson's treatment of Christ's preexistence, though impressively presented, is the "Achilles' heel" of his theology, seeing that it is burdened with problems and inconsistencies that seriously undermine the temporal framework upon which his program gets underway. For an example of this, see my discussion of Jenson's treatment of Irenaeus in "St. Irenaeus and Robert W. Jenson on Jesus in the Trinity," *JETS* 55 (2012) 111–24.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Jenson deviates from the traditional interpretation of John 1:1–3, 14 that identifies the *Logos asarkos* with the timelessly eternal Word who became incarnate at a point in time. Jenson argues instead that these verses should be understood in the light of Jesus' self-affirmation in John 8:58 ("Truly I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am.") which suggests that the *Logos* in John 1:1–3 who antedates Abraham is precisely the "aggressively incarnate" Christ (Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 1.140 [italics mine]). However, this writer would counter that the Johannine emphasis on the humanity of Christ in John 8:58 is not to be perceived in a negative relation to what John's prologue establishes clearly and early on about the preexistent *Logos* in his eternal identity. Rather, the prologue of John's Gospel enhances our understanding of Jesus' own self-cognizance as being both human and divine as the Father's eternal *Logos*. In the final analysis, what Jesus affirms by his statement in John 8:58 is nothing more or less than his real (though contingent) identity with the *Logos*, that is to say, Jesus' own self-awareness of his pre-creational and pre-temporal existence and identity as the Word. It is not warranted that we construe this identity as somehow collapsing Jesus and the preincarnate Word into a single, preexisting, eternal reality.

<sup>9</sup> Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 1.141. The paragraph where this statement is found reads thus: "In the triune life, what ontologically precedes the birth to Mary of Jesus who is God the Son, the birth, that is to say, of the sole actual second identity of that life, is the narrative pattern of *being going to be* born to Mary. What in eternity precedes the Son's birth to Mary is not an unincarnate *state* of the Son, but a pattern of movement within the event of the Incarnation, the movement to incarnate, as itself a pattern of God's triune life" (italics Jenson's). It is noteworthy that this paragraph concludes with a statement that appears to be an admission by Jenson that the speculative nature of his proposal complicates his attempts to formulate it with sufficient clarity. The actual statement, which is quite telling, reads as follows: "And here again we have gone as far as we can in this chapter—if, indeed, we have not already gone farther than language can at all carry us."

God.<sup>10</sup> That is to say, Jenson does not limit the pertinence of this concept to Mary’s son who experienced birth, suffering, death, and resurrection from the dead as the divine/human Son. On the contrary, Jenson detects and directs our attention to a dominant feature or pattern in the Hebrew Scriptures by which the Son’s identity is variously constituted, namely the dialectic of *identity/distinction*. This deep structure or pattern is exemplified particularly in what Jenson describes as “the Shekinah phenomenon”—a concept borrowed from rabbinic literature.<sup>11</sup> According to Jenson, this phenomenon incorporates a “range of figures” intrinsic to Israel’s narrative history, which “shares Israel’s lot and the Lord’s *being*.” To put it another way, this phenomenon is clearly identified with God, while simultaneously sustaining a relation of otherness to God.<sup>12</sup> This is, to use Jenson’s words, precisely “the precedence of Christ to himself that actually appears in Scripture’s narrative.”<sup>13</sup> Jenson feels justified in exploiting a NT concept—“incarnation”—to describe this state of affairs since, as he argues, this is precisely what one would expect if God is temporal along with the world he has made.

## II. PROBLEMS WITH JENSON’S APPROACH TO RELATING THE OT AND THE INCARNATION

It is this author’s judgment that Jenson is quite accurate in his assessment of the established but misguided practice in Christian theology to overlook the key role of the OT in developing an incarnational theology. Notwithstanding, it is also the opinion of this writer that Jenson’s solution is beset with its own particular problems. This becomes obvious, I think, when one considers the prospect that there are actually two pitfalls to avoid in structuring the relationship between the incarnation and the OT. As Jenson and others have rightly pointed out, the first pitfall or hazard is to presume that there is complete dissonance between the two. The second hazard, however, is to embrace the extreme opposite view of reading the incarnation backwards into the OT, which is what Jenson attempts to do. It is important, therefore, that we take the remainder of this article to list several specific objections to this second solution that Jenson heralds, as well as to attempt to offer a more Scripturally nuanced and balanced position of the interplay between the OT and the incarnation.

1. *Spatiality, spirituality, and defining God’s presence.* The first objection to Jenson’s method of reading statements about God incarnate back into the OT is that this

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<sup>10</sup> To clarify, Jenson does not identify the incarnation with creation in a strictly general manner as Hegel did.

<sup>11</sup> Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 1.78.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 1.76. One example will suffice. Jenson identifies Wisdom in Proverbs 8 with the incarnate *Logos* (not the preincarnate *Logos*, which is a commonly held view). He writes, “Who is the creature who is the ordering instance of other creatures, who speaks from creation to us, and who just so speaks for God although she is not God? ... the speaker must somehow be a preexistence of the *incarnate Logos*. His preexistence, as we analyzed it, is in one mode a narrative pattern of Israel’s previous story. Thus this mode of *Jesus’ preexistence* is just what we are looking for: a specific created reality within creation, which is the Word by which God creates.” Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 2.158 (italics mine).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 2.141.

move is undertaken in response to Jenson's "either-or" proposition about the nature of God's narrative identity: either God is identified *by* and *with* the events of history or history functions merely to point to some deeper, *unknowable* reality behind it which Christians designate as God. As Scott Swain points out, Jenson mistakenly proceeds as if these are the only two alternatives in interpreting God's triune identity.<sup>14</sup>

Jenson advocates the view of Christ's precedence to himself in the OT mostly on speculative insights derived in part from, or at least in agreement with, Michael Wyschogrod's inferences about the nature of Israel's God.<sup>15</sup> In an article to which Jenson refers in support of his view, Wyschogrod makes the following observation:

Now, one of the questions that I had to ask myself is, "What would be the real opposite of the incarnated God?" The answer that I think must be given is that the real opposite, if you want to go to the other extreme from the concept of the divine incarnation, would be a God who has no spatial location whatsoever; it would be a total, absolute, spiritual monotheism. God is a Spirit. Corporeality from this point of view would be totally foreign to a being who is spiritual. Corporeality, as Descartes already understood, is intimately connected with spatiality. The defining essence of matter is that it occupies space, and therefore if God is totally non-corporeal then there is no spatial location of God.

Once we understand that this is the kind of God who is the extreme opposite of the incarnated God, we must draw the conclusion that this extreme opposite of the incarnated God is also not the God of the Hebrew Bible. The God of the Hebrew Bible does have a spatial location. He walks in the Garden of Eden. He has a dwelling place in the world. The whole history of the tabernacle and of the temple in Jerusalem is a history of a concept of a home for God in the world, a dwelling place for God.<sup>16</sup>

Wyschogrod infers that since the OT narratives depict God as participating in activities that require spatial existence, God cannot be a purely spiritual being. To think of God as "spiritual" in the traditional sense of the concept is the "extreme opposite" of Israel's experience of God dwelling in her midst. Wyschogrod argues that Christian theology must account for "the dimension of spatiality, of the presence of God in a particular place which would not be possible if there were not some sense in which God has entered space and therefore some sense in which incarnational thinking is justified."<sup>17</sup> He adds that this is not the same thing as saying that God incarnates himself "in a particular human being," but it does mean that we should not limit our concept of the incarnation to the NT's single dimension of God dwelling with man in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Scott R. Swain, *The God of the Gospel: Robert Jenson's Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013) 82.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Wyschogrod, "Incarnation," *PrmEcd* 2 (1993) 212–13.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 210.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 211.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

It should be clear from these assertions that both Jenson and Wyschogrod deny the Biblical sense in which God’s spirituality is to be understood. Apparently, neither of these men believes that it is possible to reconcile the activities of the “God of the Hebrew Bible” with the tradition’s concept of spirituality, which, in their thinking, seems to affirm some sort of hyper-transcendence that denies any real possibility of God interacting with and being present among his people. Wyschogrod and Jenson hold that presence and spatiality must go hand in hand; pure spirituality, on the other hand, is thought to be a direct antithesis of God’s availability and presence to his people. On this basis, they speculate that Israel’s God is indeed incarnate; otherwise he “would be a total, absolute, spiritual monotheism.”<sup>19</sup>

But must the spirituality of God lead one to deny any real sense of God’s presence among his people? Is there not a way to explain statements about God dwelling with and among his people without attributing some form of corporeality to God or insisting that God is already incarnate in the OT? Is there not a better way to resolve the tension between God’s earthly presence and his superior, “incomparably transcendent” way of existing in and above history than by affirming one at the expense of the other? Are we really limited to the two alternatives that Jenson mentions?

In treating this matter, what must be affirmed straightaway is that the Biblical maxim, “God is spirit” (John 4:24), sets constraints on how we are to think about God in terms of space and corporeality. The spirituality of God cannot be dismissed so routinely as Jenson and Wyschogrod attempt to do. For God to exist as a purely spiritual being means that we are not to think of God as having size, shape, dimension, or parts. These are characteristics that delimit spatial and corporeal entities, for sure, but not God. The total essence of God is spiritual. This means that God in his excellent and superior way of existing as a spiritual being is not defined by the properties of creaturely existence. As spirit, God possesses in himself limitless freedom. However, this does not mean that divine spirituality is “foreign” or incompatible with the reality of God dwelling among his people, as Jenson and Wyschogrod infer. As an absolute, personal, spiritual being, God nonetheless can be present to and for his creatures. Theology has usually designated this quality as divine omnipresence. The omnipresence of God denotes the significant fact that there is “no place where God is not,” which is to propose that God is always present to his creation (or creation is present to God) in the totality of his spiritual being (Jer 23:23–24; Ps 139:7–10; Acts 17:28). In his omnipresence, the totality of God’s being is everywhere present without being limited by space in any sense whatsoever. God can never be in one place without being simultaneously present completely everywhere else. This is how God both fills space (immanence) and transcends space. In the totality of his being God is in all places and fills all space in a limitless, but personal way.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 210.

Additionally, God's omnipresence includes making his presence known at special times, in special places and in special ways without ceasing to be present everywhere else. Wyschogrod is absolutely right when he reminds us that God "walks in the Garden of Eden," or "has a dwelling place in the world," or that the "history of the tabernacle and of the temple in Jerusalem is a history of a concept of a home for God in the world, a dwelling place for God."<sup>20</sup> Notwithstanding, it is a mistake to infer from this data that "the God of the Hebrew Bible . . . [has] spatial location," suggesting that God is already incarnate in Israel's history and that the "precedence of Christ to himself" is an OT phenomenon.<sup>21</sup> In one sense, God is present in these particular places in the same way he is present everywhere else—omnipresently! But in another sense, as these instances demonstrate, God sometimes makes his presence known and felt as the focus of his blessings, favor, protection, care, deliverance, provisions, and so on. Indeed, as someone has observed, "It is more sensible to ask where [God] has promised to *bless* us than to ask where is His locus of existence."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Jenson's and Wyschogrod's point about God's presence in the world does not require that God be incarnate. Indeed, on the one hand, "the whole history of the tabernacle and of the temple in Jerusalem" as dwelling places for *God* is a reminder that "God's being is 'contrary to' that of his creatures in that it is not characterized by the limitations associated with creatureliness."<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, we're reminded that "creaturely finitude is not a border that keeps God out."<sup>24</sup> Therefore, Jenson's "either-or" proposition fails to reflect the way the Biblical grammar specifies God's dwelling among his people in ways that do not sacrifice or compromise his infinitely glorious and superior way of existing *as God*.<sup>25</sup> In other words, Jenson fails to see just how in this world "[in]finitude [is not] a distance that keeps God away."<sup>26</sup>

2. *John 1:14 as programmatic for incarnational thinking.* A second objection to Jenson's reading the incarnate Christ back into the OT is that in advancing this view Jenson makes a move that is rather difficult to reconcile with John's specific and programmatic use of the phrase "and the word became flesh" (Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο) in John 1:14. As we will see, Jenson's view diminishes the centrality and specificity of the Johannine concept of the incarnation by stretching its meaning backwards to incorporate several OT historical realities by which the Son's incarnate identity is supposedly revealed and constituted.

Jenson takes the Johannine statement about the *Logos* becoming flesh and applies it in a general, loose way to fit various OT phenomena, which, it is believed, depict God's relationship to his creatures as the Son in and for Israel. In other

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods: The Absolute Claims of the Christian Message* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000) 33.

<sup>23</sup> Swain, *God of the Gospel* 181.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> For an excellent discussion of this point see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 174–77.

<sup>26</sup> Swain, *God of the Gospel* 181.

words, for Jenson the actual birth of Jesus to Mary has as its antecedent the *Logos ensarkos* whose reality in the divine life explains his narrative history with Israel and whose narrative history with Israel constitutes him as the second trinitarian person. Thus, the incarnation has always been true of the Son as a narrative pattern of becoming the particular divine/human person Jesus Christ. As an example of this approach, Jenson identifies the “Word” that came to Abraham addressing him in the first person and this Word’s repeated “coming” to Israel’s prophetic element as Jesus in his OT incarnate preexistence. My suspicion, however, is that Jenson has fallen into the same type of error for which T. E. Pollard criticizes Clement of Alexandria. In his analysis of Clement’s Christology, Pollard alleges that Clement spoke confusingly of the becoming flesh of the *Logos*. Pollard writes: “Clement weakens the distinction between ‘inspiration’ and ‘incarnation’ by applying John 1:14 to the activity of the *Logos* in the prophets. The incarnation of the *Logos* in Jesus Christ does not differ from his activity in the prophets in kind, but only in degree; the latter is also a becoming-flesh.”<sup>27</sup> Pollard observes that Clement does not make any real distinction between what happened in the OT prophets and what transpired in the specific case of Jesus Christ—both are incarnations, albeit on different levels or to different degrees. This criticism applies, I think, to the way Jenson seeks to reformulate the concept of incarnation in his theology. In Jenson’s thinking, the OT realities he identifies with a preexistent Jesus differ from the Johannine concept of the incarnation “in degree” but not “in kind.” In other words, these are all incarnational instantiations of the Son of God, differing only in the degree that they approximate God becoming flesh in the specific person of Jesus. Again, as Jenson puts it, these are all instances of the Son’s “*being going to be born to Mary*.”<sup>28</sup>

However, in making this assertion Jenson must circumvent the logic of John’s opening Christological assertions in the gospel that bears his name.<sup>29</sup> Of first import is the two-stage Christological movement detected in these verses. In the opening verses of John’s unique account of Jesus’ life and ministry, the author announces in unambiguous language that the *Logos*, who existed “in the beginning with God and was God,” subsequently assumed a mode of existence that is clearly distinct from the mode of his eternal existence as the divine Son (John 1:1–14). Although Jenson refuses to view this movement in terms of “successive states” of

<sup>27</sup> T. E. Pollard, *Johannine Christology and the Early Church* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1978) 82.

<sup>28</sup> Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 1.141.

<sup>29</sup> R. H. Lightfoot’s commentary on the Gospel of John is quite standard in its representation of the significance of John’s opening words. Lightfoot writes: “These verses give the key to the understanding of this gospel and make it clear how the evangelist wishes his readers to approach his presentation of the Lord’s work and Person; and equally the rest of the book will throw light on the contents of these verses. The readers therefore should constantly recall this prologue, when in the course of the rest of the gospel he meets with words as life, light, glory, and truth, here used with reference to the Lord” (R. H. Lightfoot, *St. John’s Gospel: A Commentary* [ed. C. F. Evans; Oxford: Clarendon, 1956] 78). As to the importance of John stressing our Lord’s preexistent divinity, Lightfoot offers the following observation: “But it has been made clear at the very beginning that the Lord’s Person, in this gospel, will be approached primarily from the divine side, by way of the *Logos* doctrine, not, as in the earlier gospels, by way of the Jewish messianic hope” (*ibid.*).

the Word—a *Logos asarkos* and a *Logos ensarkos*, respectively—this seems to be precisely what John affirms.<sup>30</sup>

The history of interpretation of this *locus classicus* has maintained that the definitive teaching of John's Christology is that the incarnation was something new for the Word who was in the beginning with the Father. In verse 1, John introduces his thesis with a reference to cosmic origins specified by the formula "in the beginning" (Ἐν ἀρχῇ). Genesis 1:1 in the Septuagint uses the same phrase, as Jenson points out, indicating that its meaning in Genesis corresponds to that in John's Gospel. Augustine's important dictum, of course, reminds us that the world and time are correlative aspects of God's creative activity. Thus we are justified in viewing "in the beginning" in both the Genesis account and in John's as referring to the absolute beginning of the time-space universe.

John's argument in his opening salvo proclaiming the eternal deity of the Son is that at the absolute inception of the universe the *Logos* already and always "was" (ἦν). The imperfect tense in the Greek denotes divine existence as an enduring quality—"the Word continually was"—and is used repeatedly in John 1:1–3 to express this state.<sup>31</sup> According to John's opening assertions then, prior to the creation of anything the Word always existed in inner-trinitarian relation to the Father (and the Spirit), which relation is demarcated in terms of the Word's association with yet distinction from God—"the Word was with God" (καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν);<sup>32</sup> the Word's identity with God—"the Word was God" (καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος); the Word's co-eternity with God—"he was in the beginning with God" (οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν); and the Word's role as the agent of creation—"All things were made by him" (πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο). Observe here that in these brief but inexhaustibly profound declarations, the Word, not the human Jesus, is repeatedly associated with God. This is a significant point. Contrary to contemporary exegesis that wants to see Jesus from verse one on, there is nothing in John's prologue to suggest or warrant such an interpretation. John's prologue clearly portrays a dynamic and decisive Christological movement that climaxes in the explicit identification of the *Logos asarkos* with a *Logos ensarkos*, that is, the historical Jesus, in verse 14: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν).

It is instructive that we labor a bit longer at verse 14 since, in the history of Christian doctrine, it, and not John 8:58 (as Jenson insinuates), sets forth the regulative Christological principle of John's Gospel. In verse 14, John uses the verb

<sup>30</sup> To review, Jenson's interpretation of the mode of Christ's preexistence is not based on a detailed exegesis of the these opening verses, but is derived from the priority he gives Jesus' self-designation in John 8:58—"Before Abraham was, I am." Jenson's hermeneutic, it seems, requires John 8:58 to serve as the regulative Christological principle in determining the nature of Jesus' preexisting state. According to Jenson, John 8:58 establishes that the mode by which Jesus predates Abraham is as the "aggressively incarnate" Christ, not as the timelessly eternal *Logos*.

<sup>31</sup> BAGD 282–83.

<sup>32</sup> I agree with Millard Erickson who understands John to be speaking qualitatively here—the Word was of the same divine quality as the Father. See Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 200.



“became” (ἐγένετο) to mark the transition in thought from preexistence to incarnation. Although the precise meaning of this term, historically, has been difficult to pin down, certainly what must be excluded from its semantic range is the kenotic idea that the *Logos* divested himself of deity, as well as the docetic notion that the *Logos* indwelt Jesus temporarily, departing before his suffering on the cross. The witness of Scripture opposes both of these interpretations. Whatever “became” means, the text and context suggest that the Word assumed a mode of existence that was not his previously, that “becoming flesh” was a totally new condition undertaken by the divine *Logos*. However, as one teases out the implications of Jenson’s exegesis, one discovers that a preexisting incarnate Jesus actually “became flesh and dwelt among us.” In Jenson’s system the Word would have become something it already was—incarnate—which, in this author’s judgment, nullifies the whole point of the verse. Clearly, John is not advocating a Christological tautology. The reverse is true: the Word, not Jesus, is said to have assumed human form.

This point may be explored from a different angle. We may note here that more is being asserted in verse 14 than the notion of the Word becoming what it was not. Present, too, is the correlative notion that the Word did not cease to be what it *already was*. Hamerton-Kelly’s observation that the key to understanding “became” is viewing it in conjunction with its accompanying verb, “to dwell” (ἐσκήνωσεν), is on the mark, I think, in delineating this second aspect of verse 14. Hamerton-Kelly writes: “The subtle qualification of ἐγένετο by ἐσκήνωσεν in verse 14 suggests ... that the incarnation is not understood as a negation of the pre-existent dignity of the Logos. The incarnate one remains the pre-existent one; this paradox must be maintained.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, by “dwelt,” John indicates that the “becoming flesh” of the *Logos* by no means nullifies or cancels or diminishes the reality of the eternal *Logos*. It is precisely the Word who preexisted in eternity with the Father, “became flesh,” and later “dwelt among us” in the person of Jesus Christ. Obviously this point is obscured by theologians like Jenson who want to maintain that it is Jesus of Nazareth who preexists in the Godhead. Instead, their view advances the somewhat pointless observation that in the incarnation Jesus became what he already was without ceasing to be what he already was! John’s subtle nuancing of the language in verse 14, however, upholds the paradox of humanity and deity, eternity and time, united in one person without conversion or confusion.

Finally, John seems to be quite specific in the prologue of his Gospel when he states that the Word became “flesh” (σάρξ). The question we must ask is, Does the term “flesh” allow the interpretive range that Jenson assigns it? That is, does the term permit the understanding of “creature in general,” as Jenson seems to render

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre-Existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man: A Study of the Idea of Pre-Existence in the NT* (SNTSMS 21; Cambridge: University Press, 1973) 207.

it as a warrant for finding the incarnation everywhere?<sup>34</sup> Or is the term specific and therefore limited regarding to whom or what it may be applied?

Interestingly, the Biblical meaning of “flesh” is clear. Its usage indicates that the NT concept of the incarnation is not as elastic as Jenson makes it out to be. The basic usage of the term is to say something about human life or a condition thereof, whether it is the flesh that covers the body (1 Cor 15:39), the physical body itself (Acts 2:31), “flesh and blood” (Matt 16:17; here, human in contrast to that which is divine), human nature or descent (Rom 9:8), human limitations (1 Cor 7:28), the human realm of existence (Rom 4:1), or the human body as the instrument of sinful urgings or sexual desires (Rom 7:25).<sup>35</sup> The point here is that σάρξ rarely ever refers to a general notion of creatureliness, which seems to be the way Jenson wants to interpret it. Rather, σάρξ refers specifically to human life or some condition associated with it. Therefore, the incarnation, according to the language of John 1:1–14, denotes that the Word, although existing “in the beginning” with God, becomes a human creature with all that that entails except for contamination of sin. Therefore, the specifically Johannine concept of the incarnation is that the eternal second member of the Trinity “became flesh,” that is to say, he became a specific human person at a specific point in time. The incarnation, according to John, is quite limited and specific in its connotation.

This writer is convinced therefore that to speak of Christ’s preexistence as the pattern of “being going to be born of Mary” as opposed to the Word existing timelessly in the triune life is difficult to square with John’s programmatic assertions about the *Logos* in the opening chapter of his Gospel. Jenson has not given any clear Biblical or theological warrant for taking statements about the *Logos* in John’s prologue and generalizing them in a way so that they function to define the nature of the *Logos*’ reality in and among Israel as God incarnate.

3. *The incarnation as the apex of divine self-revealing.* A third objection to Jenson’s OT treatment of the doctrine of incarnation is that it undermines the function of the incarnation as the pinnacle and centerpiece of God’s self-revelation in redemptive history.

It is relevant to note that Jenson does not discuss these OT incarnational-defining phenomena under the traditional concept of “theophany.”<sup>36</sup> If we accept the standard definition of “theophany” as “visible evidence of [God’s] presence on the earth,”<sup>37</sup> then we can perhaps see why Jenson is reluctant to use this terminology. Jenson has insisted all along that the “Shekinah phenomenon” of the OT is specifically the “biblical Son,” God incarnate in a preexistent mode of being, not merely the presence of God, the Father, in other forms.<sup>38</sup> According to Jenson, the

<sup>34</sup> In his discussion of the “Son” as an incarnational pointer to what it means to be “in flesh,” Jenson makes the point emphatically that “flesh” is to be equated with “creature.” The discussion with which Jenson follows makes it clear that “creature” is being used in a general sense rather than in the specific sense of Jesus’ humanity. See Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 1.78–80.

<sup>35</sup> BDAG 743–44.

<sup>36</sup> As far as I can tell, this term is not used anywhere in the two volumes of Jenson’s work.

<sup>37</sup> Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the OT* (trans. J. A. Baker; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961) 2.16.

<sup>38</sup> Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 1.141.

evidence of God’s presence in the OT is precisely that of the preexistent incarnate Christ. However, this view is far afield of scholars who in the history of Christian doctrine have tended to generally agree that these physical, visible indications of God’s presence are theophanies, that is, veiled appearances of God, or, in some cases, appearances of the preincarnate Son, but never appearances of the incarnate second Person.<sup>39</sup> Though certainly distancing myself from James D. G. Dunn’s major conclusions concerning the nature of NT preexistence, this writer does find his summations on this point partly helpful in defining the nature of the OT theophanies. For example, Dunn points out that these OT figures

never really reach the status of divine beings independent of God in Jewish thought. They all remain in the literature of our period (Philo included) ways of speaking of God’s powerful interaction with his world and his people, God’s experienced immanence through nature and revelation, in Torah, prophet and saving act, which yet did not infringe his transcendence. Their pre-existence is the pre-existence of God, of God’s purpose to create and redeem.<sup>40</sup>

According to Dunn, the OT figures that Jenson wants to designate as modes of the Son’s incarnate existence are more likely theophanies, evidences of God’s presence, but not appearances of the incarnate Son. This suggests that as a NT phenomenon, the incarnation of the Son is a unique theophany and the climax of all the OT theophanies. This suggests, second, that the incarnation of Christ and the OT theophanies do not differ merely in degree, but they differ in kind. The incarnation, we can say, is a different kind of theophany. As Swain rightly observes, “while the incarnation is an instance in the history of God’s relation to the world, it is not *merely* an instance in the history of God’s relation to the world. The incarnation is *sui generis*.”<sup>41</sup> This is the case because the “Son does not merely *relate* to the world he created. He *enters* the world and becomes a member *of* that world.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the incarnation must be viewed as belonging to an altogether unique class of theophanies in that the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Word, actually becomes a human being who was born of a virgin conceived through the Holy Spirit. Loraine Boettner’s comments on this point are concise and well worth noting.

The glory of the present dispensation is that in Christ God came personally, and through His own person and work has given man an incomparably more advanced revelation concerning both His own nature and the plan of salvation. The great God who made this world actually came down to the world that He had made, and walked and talked with the people whom He created.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> I am not fully convinced that these are preincarnate appearances of the Son, though the matter does not really concern us here. But see Judges 13, especially v. 22, which seems to uphold this identification.

<sup>40</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A NT Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 252–53.

<sup>41</sup> Swain, *The God of the Gospel* 171 (emphasis his).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 172.

<sup>43</sup> Loraine Boettner, *Studies in Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1947) 205–6.

Here Boettner sees the incarnation of God in Christ as incomparably superior to all of the other ways God has disclosed himself in salvation history. However, this point is obviously lost to Jenson since he argues that the second trinitarian Person has always been incarnate in one form or another. However, to understand there to be multiple modes of Christ's incarnate existence weakens the point that "God dwells in a particular human being"<sup>44</sup> and jeopardizes the central function of the incarnation in redemptive history as the apex of God's self-revelation.

What shall we conclude finally concerning Jenson's take on the connection between the OT and the doctrine of the incarnation? First, Jenson is certainly right in reminding us that it is an incorrect procedure in theology to suppose a disconnect between the two. This writer concurs with Jenson's criticism that the direction of incarnational thought has been developed typically and erroneously with relatively little thought or attention given to the influence of the OT upon its construction. Second, however, in my judgment Jenson is wrong in having overstated his case by making the OT too foundational to incarnational thought. Perhaps one could argue that in some instances the *preincarnate* Christ is to be identified with appearances of God in the OT. But to identify the *incarnate* Christ with the physical forms by which Israel came to experience God in a manner that simultaneously conveyed and concealed his majestic presence is to exceed the evidence that can be drawn from the Biblical material by a wide margin. Therefore, in considering the lines we have traced thus far, it seems that Jenson has miscalculated his attempt to say how "the one Jesus Christ as God precedes himself as man in the very triune life which he lives eternally as the God-man."<sup>45</sup> The OT just does not provide the conceptual apparatus that Jenson needs in order to construct a doctrine of preexistence that is compatible with his view of an *always incarnate Son*.

### III. A BIBLICAL AND BALANCED VIEW OF THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE OT AND INCARNATIONAL THOUGHT

So how, then, do we formulate the relationship between the OT and incarnational thinking in a way that neither overstates nor understates the case? To his credit, Jenson's observation that there is a pattern or deep structure to Scripture by which God is clearly seen as involved with his creatures from the beginning of redemptive history is a good place to start. However, I would not go as far as Jenson in referring to this in terms of *identity* with God. What must be avoided here is identifying this involvement straightforwardly with God's identity so that God is viewed in the OT as already incarnate, as already identified *with* his moral creatures. Colin Gunton reminds us that OT theophanies are basically "evidences of that interrelationship of God with his creation which comes to its perfection in Jesus."<sup>46</sup> Likewise, Dunn observes, as we have already seen, that theophanies speak "of God's

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<sup>44</sup> Wyschogrod, "Incarnation" 211.

<sup>45</sup> Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 1.141.

<sup>46</sup> Colin Gunton, "Augustine, the Trinity, and the Theological Crisis of the West," in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991) 44.

powerful interaction with his world and his people, God’s experienced immanence through nature and revelation, in Torah, prophet and saving act, which yet did not infringe his transcendence.”<sup>47</sup> These assertions seem to suggest that in reference to God’s involvement with his creatures the dominant motif or pattern in the OT narratives is not that of *identity*, but that of *interrelationship* or *interaction*, which focuses on that which constitutes God’s *relationship* with his people, not his self-identity. Here we are emphasizing God’s “contingent properties” which “do not refer to God’s *being* but rather God’s relationships to those (contingent) beings which are external to his being.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, the forms in which God’s presence was made known in the OT should be interpreted in *covenantal* terms not *ontological* terms. These constitute God’s *covenant* identity, his being *our God*, not his *being God*.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, God’s covenant interrelationship or interaction with his creatures comes to full-blown status in the actual incarnation of the Word, whereby God is finally and supremely identified *with* his creatures, without ceasing to be God. Therefore, contra Jenson, in the OT the line between the *by* of God’s identity and the *with* of God’s identity is never blurred. The Creator-creature distinction is never conceded. Indeed, God is identified *by* these OT phenomena but never *with* them. These figures are “forms of God’s self-manifestation,” as Eichrodt calls them, but they never attain the status of *God with us by becoming one of us*, which is the rigorously Scriptural concept of incarnation. The appearance of these various and limited forms under the old covenant era form the backdrop for the appearance of one under the new covenant era in whom the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form (Col. 2:9). But the two should never be confused or conflated. Therefore, the incarnation is unique in that it demarcates God’s interrelationship with his creatures *as one of them and one with them*—“Immanuel.” This was never the case in the OT. The limited and cryptic way in which God manifested himself in the OT prepares one for the incomparably superior and qualitatively unique appearance of God in the person of Christ in the NT. While the two are distinct, they nonetheless mutually reinforce each other. Thus we see how both the OT and the NT contribute to the construction of a Biblical incarnational theology.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

As a last word and concession of sorts, there is a general and nontechnical sense in which some refer to God’s OT appearances as “incarnations.” Ralph Klein, for example, reminds us of this when he remarks that we may “speak more broadly of an incarnational theology which accepts all creatures great and small.”<sup>50</sup> Likewise, Eichrodt speaks of God in the OT “temporarily incarnat[ing] himself” for the sake of his people. These men are acknowledging a loose, non-technical sense in which

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<sup>47</sup> Dunn, *Christology* 252.

<sup>48</sup> Swain, *The God of the Gospel* 148.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 149.

<sup>50</sup> Ralph W. Klein, “Christology and Incarnation: Fulfillment and Radical Reinterpretation of the OT Prophets,” *ExAud* 7–8 (1991–1992) 15.

the incarnation may be understood as evidences of God's power and presence among his people. However, as "broadly" and "temporarily" suggest, these "incarnations" never denote a full and direct identification of God with these forms.<sup>51</sup> Again, there is no real, substantive, ontological identification with God. Perhaps, then, for the sake of clarity and theological precision, the wisest approach to this matter is to avoid using the term "incarnation" to denote OT realities. It is better, I think, to continue to follow sound Biblical tradition which speaks of the incarnation in its NT context, but without overlooking its OT connections. We cite Klein again in this regard: "Christology and Incarnation are both terms from New Testament studies and from the history of Christian doctrine. What we say about the Christ, however, needs to be shaped by Israel's longing for the one who was to come."<sup>52</sup> To speak of the incarnation then is primarily a NT task, which nonetheless should not overlook the vantage point of the OT in its analysis and formulation.

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<sup>51</sup> Eichrodt, *Theology of the OT* 2.27. Eichrodt qualifies this by saying that by this activity God was working through a "mask" or "dummy" to communicate his will, which point argues against a full identity with God.

<sup>52</sup> Kline, "Christology and Incarnation" 16.