

God incarnate?

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THE ballyhoo is over, by and large. *The Myth of God Incarnate*,¹ carefully launched by well-timed publicity at the beginning of the summer, astonished the church, put the General Synod of the Church of England into apoplexy, and amused a sceptical public. Then in August, preceded by some enthusiastic heraldry from the episcopal bench, St Michael and 'some angels' advanced boldly to fight for the 'Truth'² and to emerge, many claim, triumphant from the encounter. But what was the battle about—and is the dragon really dead?

First of all, may I make a plea that we should not denigrate the writers of the *Myth* or deny their worthy desire to promote Christianity. I know a few of the essayists and recognize in them a love for Christ and a desire to serve Him in the world. Furthermore, each one is a distinguished scholar in his own right and a few are among the foremost theologians and scholars in our country. So we cannot dismiss them contemptuously as theological 'fledglings' who are still learning to fly, or as wicked men whose deliberate goal is to put down the gospel. It is not that simple. To make it an 'open and shut' case of heresy does them less than justice or, indeed, the questions they bring for consideration.

In case you have not yet had a chance to read the book, the theme running through the symposium of ten essays is that the doctrine of the Incarnation—that Jesus is both God and Man—is a construction built upon the New Testament, not found there. This doctrine, argue the writers, is an embarrassment for modern Christians living in a non-Christian world. Jesus was a real man, with a mother and father in the normal way. He was a man of His times, to be sure an exceptional man, but one who had a human mind, which means He was limited in knowledge and outlook. 'Incarnation' is a word with a complicated theological history closely connected with metaphysical ideas like 'natures', 'Hypostases' and 'substance'. We must be honest and reasonable people and acknowledge that it is no longer possible to talk in the same kind of way. Indeed, in our own

time it is positively harmful to do so. Let us keep the word 'incarnation' by all means, but let us recognize it plainly as a way of understanding the significance of Jesus for us. It is a 'myth', in other words, which invites a particular attitude in Christians.

So far the student who has already been sniffing around a little in Christology will find nothing new in the book. But what is new is the concerted effort made by seven Professors and scholars to draw attention to their viewpoint. It is a piece of apologetic aimed at changing the landscape of doctrine; it is a piece of propaganda which trumpets in no uncertain way: 'The New Testament writers got it wrong, the early church got it wrong, the great saints, scholars and theologians of the past got it wrong—but we offer you the truth, "Jesus was not the second person of the Trinity".' I think we ought to feel the force of this as an attractive option today. To say that Jesus 'was the most wonderful man that ever lived' makes Christianity a milder and more reasonable proposition to modern people than traditional belief. I am in touch with an intelligent lady who cannot accept the traditional understanding of Incarnation but who feels that the *Myth* offers her a way forward into belief. But the question is not, as Ronald Knox argued long ago against another symposium entitled *Foundations*, 'How much will Jones swallow?' but 'Is this what the New Testament teaches us?' The starting-point for truth must not be our existential position—'What can we believe today?'—but 'What are we given in Scripture and Christian theology to believe?'

But let us look a little more closely at some of the assumptions made by the writers of *The Myth of God Incarnate*.

I. Interpretation of the New Testament data

Although the essayists are critical of the New Testament's evidence for Jesus, they tend more to argue that our interpretation of it is at fault. Thus Maurice Wiles points out that 'Incarnation in its full and proper sense is not something directly presented in scripture' (p. 3). Of course not. We cannot find a

¹*The Myth of God Incarnate*. Ed. J. Hick (SCM Press, 1977).

²*The Truth of God Incarnate*. Ed. Michael Green (Hodder and Stoughton, 1977).

verse which says that Jesus was very God and very Man. But the same thing may be said of other doctrines also. Take the Trinity—we look in vain for a statement in the New Testament which says that the persons of the Trinity are ‘co-equal and co-eternal’. It was left to the early church to draw out the significance of Jesus for the doctrine of God. Now, to return to Wiles’ statement, if he means that there is no testimony to Jesus being fully human and divine, then he is very, very wrong. This error is repeated elsewhere in the volume. Frances Young can say whole-heartedly that ‘the New Testament is totally Christocentric’ and on the same page say that ‘the notion of God being incarnate is read into, not out of, the Pauline Epistles’ (p. 22). It does not require much Bible knowledge, however, to realize that sweeping statements like this are just not true. Any student of Pauline Christology knows how high that Christology is with such titles applied to Jesus as ‘Lord’, ‘Image’, ‘Glory’, ‘First-born’, ‘Son of God’, to name but a few. One can point to passages such as Philippians 2:5-11; Romans 8:3; Colossians 1:15-22; 2 Corinthians 8:9, *et al.*, where Incarnation, even if the word is not used, is central to Paul’s thinking. Of course he is not talking in Chalcedonian terms about Christ being ‘two natures in one substance’, but the same truth is implicit in his teaching. The same may be said about other New Testament writers like John, the author of Hebrews and 1 Peter. So whether the writers of the *Myth* like it or not, the New Testament is clear in its testimony concerning Jesus—that ‘Godhood’ and ‘manhood’ are proper categories to apply to Him.

2. Myth as a vehicle of understanding

The use of the word ‘myth’ to describe the central tenet of the gospel has infuriated many people. I do not find it infuriating, but I do consider it misleading, ill-advised and harmful. Not only is ‘myth’ a loaded word in popular language—because it describes something which was once believed to be true but now is falsified by modern knowledge—but even when it is used as a technical word in philosophy, theology or classics, its ever-shifting meaning makes it an uncertain guide for communication. Even in the *Myth* the word ‘myth’ is not used in a uniform manner. In the Introduction, for example, Maurice Wiles says of orthodoxy that it is a ‘myth’, meaning that there is no such thing. Later in the book Frances Young makes it mean ‘realities beyond normal means of scientific investigation which are also indefinable in terms of human language’ (p. 34). Like ‘love’, perhaps? It is, however, left to Maurice Wiles to attempt to define ‘myth’ when applied to the Incarnation. It is something which is ‘told but which is not literally true...it invites a particular attitude in its hearers’ (p. 178). The appropriateness of a myth

will depend upon some correlation between the story and our experience of reality. So for the myth of resurrection to be appropriate it is necessary to believe that in some way man lives on beyond death. This he calls the ‘ontological truth’ which corresponds to the myth itself. Applying this to the Incarnation, Wiles points to the appropriateness of this myth: first, the life of Jesus embodied such openness to God, which is in itself a parable of the loving outreach of God to the world; second, there is the historical relation between Jesus and the experience of grace in His followers. According to Prof. Wiles, then, even if the Incarnation is not historically true, it is still a meaningful myth because of the significance of Jesus.

Very clever. But not very helpful to the average reader, because by this time he is confused by the language used and will want to know more about the relationship between ‘myth’ and the ‘reality’ it purports to express. He will ask bluntly, ‘Is there any reality, in fact, to the Incarnation myth?’ And if there is no historical reality can a myth survive? Prof. Wiles confesses that he does not know whether it will have any power once it is believed to be not literally true. But I have no doubts on this score. Once we say that Jesus was not in any real sense the Son of God the Incarnation will cease to be a helpful way of expressing the action of God—it will become an embarrassing symbol to modern people. Myth in modern theology has become, in fact, a sort of ‘do-it-yourself’ kit: ‘We supply the words, you supply the meaning.’ But, as we have seen, the background of the word in our culture is emotively and semantically unhelpful. At the end of the day it is a question of belief in the testimony of the New Testament; are we prepared to say, with John’s Gospel, that ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son’? By confessing this we do not fall into some form of gross materialism. Clearly we do not fully understand the physical and spiritual implications of this, but we do know that we are confessing that in Jesus God has made Himself known to us, fully, finally and uniquely.

3. The question of Jesus

The writers of the *Myth* clearly assert their strong reverence for, and commitment to, Jesus. There is common ground here which makes dialogue possible between radicals and conservative theologians. It is a delight to read such statements that Jesus is the one in whom ‘we meet God’ (p. 8), that He is ‘as-if-God for me’ (p. 39), that He has a unique role and ‘no one has the same role for faith’ (p. 40), that ‘he was intensely and overwhelmingly conscious of the reality of God’ (p. 172). All Christians should be able to re-echo these fine words. But what is the basis

for saying them? The essayists are very critical of the integrity of the New Testament in conveying the truth about Jesus and one wonders, therefore, how they can give vent to such warm expressions to a person known only to us—at the human level—through the New Testament? If they reject its testimony concerning Jesus' divinity, pre-existence and Sonship, surely there is a serious methodological problem concerning their use of the New Testament. One does not have the luxury to pick and choose which texts we prefer to follow and to discard the remainder. Indeed we agree with Frances Young that the New Testament is a 'testimony meeting', because 'for each writer Jesus Christ has become the central focus of his life and faith in God' (p. 14). But one must emphasize that it is a special testimony, which controls Christian theology and authenticates the experiences of those who claim to follow Jesus. Who says so? The church says so in its Canon, in its creeds, its formularies and history down the centuries; and the Holy Spirit says so in the life of the Christian. What, indeed, we fail to find in the *Myth* is any sense of the value of the New Testament as an authority which governs the lives of Christians and which is the yardstick of theology. This basic failure means that Jesus becomes the projection of subjective experiences, so we choose the texts and passages which suit us and reject those which fail to agree with our experience of the world. One set we call 'truth', the other 'myth'.

Thus it becomes difficult to understand how Michael Goulder can reject most of the New Testament Christology, salvation and its teaching concerning the resurrection and still say, 'Jesus is *the* man of universal destiny' (Ch. 3). The fact is, however, Goulder's iconoclastic approach has robbed him of the very basis for making this stirring expression of faith! But it must be said that it is here in the attitude to Scripture that we have the greatest divide between the radical and the traditionalist or conservative. This divide is getting wider and wider and the symposium under review is just an example of a fundamental difference of approach to the Old and New Testaments. Yes, it is possibly true that evangelicals have much to learn from Scripture and must also learn not to regard with suspicion all that goes under the name of critical research. But it is equally true that the moment we cut ourselves loose from the moorings of the authority of the Bible we find ourselves drifting helplessly in waters of subjectivism. *The Myth of God Incarnate* indicates how far one can drift.

There is also a second set of questions concerning Jesus and His uniqueness. At some point we have

to face up to some searching questions such as: Is Jesus the only way to God? Were His life and death indispensable for man's salvation? Does He reveal God or only seek Him with the rest of us? In spite of the writers' enthusiasm for Jesus and their commitment to His cause, it has to be admitted that they do not answer such questions with any degree of conviction. Jesus appears to represent the highest peak of man's achievement, differing from us only in degree. I must say that I find the distinction made between God and man on the basis of degree very unconvincing. If it is God's nature to be wise, like man, only more so; and good, like man, only more so; and powerful, like man, only more so; then Jesus ends up in between. What is more, He is somewhere up that ladder with Buddha, Maharaj Ji, Muhammad and other great men and women. We are then left with all sorts of problems. What degree constitutes divinity? Does not this make Jesus some kind of hybrid who is far superior to ordinary mortals but not in the same league as God Almighty? Furthermore, does not a superhuman Jesus miles ahead of us up the human ladder divide us from Him? What does such a figure know of ordinary sins and weaknesses? 'Each man is potentially God-incarnate,' states Frances Young (p. 47) and this is nice to know! But our experience as well as our knowledge of the Bible tell us otherwise. Whatever the word 'potentially' is supposed to serve, Christians in the main have agreed that among all the figures in human history Jesus is utterly unique, alone in His status among men and in His work of uniting men to the Father. 'Degree' terminology, from this perspective, is an unsatisfactory way of speaking of Jesus' relationship with the Father and fails to account for His significance among men.

In the Introduction to *The Myth of God Incarnate* Maurice Wiles claims that the aim of the book is to 'clear the ground'. I am all for research, for asking difficult questions, for devout and honest study of the Scriptures. But my own investigations of this volume suggest that not only is the ground cleared but the fertile top soil has been removed. Nothing will grow in the ground cleared by such theologians; only preaching and teaching based upon whole-hearted commitment to Jesus, the Incarnate Lord, has any durability. Whether the dragon is dead, I know not. I'd like to believe that its undoubted talents for destruction may be used for creation. Now St Michael and the dragon—that's a partnership I'd like to see!



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