

Jesus the Son of God and the Incarnation Doctrine

Antonella Khursheed and Anjam Khursheed

Abstract

This paper shows that the Bahá'í approach to the sonship and divinity of Christ is consistent with Old and New Testament usage. It also examines the Incarnation Doctrine and shows that its roots are to be traced to pagan influences creeping into Christian belief in the early centuries of its growth.

Introduction

Among Christians throughout centuries, the concept of Jesus as Son of God or even as God Incarnate has become a common notion. Only a few theologians and historians have paused to examine what it means or meant.

The Incarnation Doctrine was formally declared to be a fundamental pillar to the Christian faith at a council that met in 325 A.D. in the town of Nicea, now called Iznik, in Eastern Turkey. There, representatives of the early Christian churches signed a document which stated the following: "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made."¹ Most Christian churches share this declaration, now known as the Nicene Creed, all over the world in surprising unity.

¹ Ian Wilson, "Jesus: The Evidence", Pan Books Ltd, Basingstoke, Hants (England), 1985, p 11

Historically, the belief in Jesus as God incarnate has not only divided Christians from Jews and Muslims, but also sadly used to justify persecutions, crusades and pogroms. Nowadays, as people of different religions are coming into closer contact with one another, the Incarnation Doctrine is under greater scrutiny. A growing number of people, not only those belonging to religions other than Christianity, are questioning its validity. In the modern inter-faith dialogue, the Incarnation Doctrine is often associated with an exclusive stance of Christian superiority with respect to other religions, and is one of the major obstacles towards achieving a higher level of inter-religious harmony.

This paper sets out to demonstrate a close correlation between the sonship and divinity of Christ as it appears in the Bible and the Bahá'í writings. It argues that the Incarnation Doctrine is not something which can be supported from the Bible, but rather, arose from historical circumstances that surrounded the growth of the Christian faith in its early centuries.

1. "Son of God"

1.1 The Old Testament

What did the "Son of God" title mean to the Jews who met Christ? There are no certain answers to this question, but from a study of the Jewish scriptures, we can conclude that there were at least three possible ways in which the Jews would have understood this title. The first usage is in terms of angels or heavenly beings. The second meaning signifies the Israelites or people of Israel. The third usage of the Son of God term is associated with the anointed kings of Israel.

Since in the Gospels stress is specifically placed upon Jesus being descended from David, and all other descriptions of him refer to a living human being, the first category is not consistent with the New Testament usage.

The second meaning encompasses a wide variety of different usages that all relate to the Israelites collectively and individually. The Israelites are referred to as "children of the Lord", in the sense that they are chosen by

God, a holy people, and bear likeness to God. "Ye are the children of the Lord your God... For thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God, and the Lord hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth" (Deut. 14:1).

It is stated that Israel is God's son whose purpose is to serve God. When instructing Moses on what to say to the Pharaoh, God states: "And thou shalt say unto the Pharaoh, Thus saith the Lord, Israel is my son, even my first born. And I say unto thee, let my son go, that he may serve thee." (Exodus 4:22-23)

When the Israelites wanted to make mention of "the loving kindnesses of the Lord, the praises of the Lord" (Isaiah 63:7), they recalled how the Lord was Israel's saviour, how He had trust in them as His honest "children", "Surely they are my people, children that will not lie: so he was their Saviour" (Isaiah 63: 8). When the Israelites prayed for God's guidance, they stated that in contrast to their physical descendants, God was their true Father, the one who had always guided and "redeemed" them: "Doubtless thou art our father, though Abraham be ignorant of us, and Israel acknowledge us not: thou, O Lord, art our father, our redeemer, thy name is from everlasting" (Isaiah 63:16).

In Psalm 82.6, the Israelites are referred to as "gods" and the "children of the most High". This statement appears in a passage which starts by describing God's justice, "God standeth in the congregation of the mighty, he judgeth among gods. How long will ye judge unjustly, and accept the persons of the wicked?... Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy: rid them out of the hand of the wicked..." (Ps. 82:1-4). Obviously here, the Israelites are taken to be those who judge alongside God, and those who carry out God's judgement. Part of their task is to protect the "poor and needy" from the "wicked", and in this respect, they are stated to be fallible "gods" who have fallen short of their high purpose. The Jews as "gods" and "sons of the most High" are the "congregation of the mighty" whose purpose is to execute God's judgements.

These passages show that the Israelites were considered to be "sons of God" because they were His holy servants who declared God's glory and justice, and were specially chosen to carry out His purpose.

The Son of God title is also given to King David, and at other times, refers to a special Israelite ruler who is destined to carry out God's punishment.

King David is called 'my son', 'I will be his father, and he will be my son' (2 Sam. 7:14). Elsewhere David is referred to as the 'first born' of God, 'He will say to me, 'Thou art my father, my God, and the rock of my salvation. Also I will make him my first-born, higher than the kings of the earth' (Ps. 89:26-7). Six verses before this passage, David is referred to as 'my servant', and the specific reference of the King being anointed is made, "I have found David my servant; with my holy oil have I anointed him: with whom my hand shall be established: mine arm also shall strengthen him" (Ps 89: 20-1). In the context of a special Israelite ruler, God speaks of a king as his Son who will punish other nations, "Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion. 'I will declare the decree: the Lord hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee' "(Ps 2:7).

1.2 The New Testament

In the New Testament, references to "Son of God" are consistent with Old Testament usage. In John 10:34, Jesus specifically defines what is meant by the "Son of God" title. Some Jews accused him of blasphemy and were ready to stone him for it (John 10:33). Jesus in response states that "Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods? If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken, Say ye of him, whom the father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, thou blasphemest because I said, I am the Son of God? If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. But if I do, though ye believe me not, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him" (John 10: 34-38). In this passage, Jesus clearly explains that the Son of God term refers to those "to whom the word of God came", that is, to whom God had entrusted to carry His message. Jesus also makes it clear that this term especially applies to him, whom the Father had "sanctified, and sent into the world". These words demonstrate that the

unity of God and Christ was one of purpose, not of substance and is quite consistent with the Old Testament usage.

In the first chapter of John's gospel the term "sons of God" is used for those who came to believe in Christ. Faith in the message of Christ is equated with being born "of God": "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become sons of God, even to them that believe on his name. Which were born, not of blood, nor of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). A few verses later, "the only begotten Son" is related to Jesus being a sign of God, who "declared him": No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him" (John 1:18). These passages show that Christ was a Son amongst sons of God. His life and message was the channel through which God could be known. They do not imply that God was unknown to the Jews before Christ appeared, but through his coming a much fuller knowledge of God was made possible.

As in the Old Testament, there are references in the New Testament to the Jews becoming the children of God through acquiring spiritual qualities. In the Sermon on the Mount, it is stated that, "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God" (Matth. 5:9). This is also true for those who love their enemies, "love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven." (Matth. 5:44-45). Here, a spiritual kinship with God is made through acquiring spiritual perfection, bearing likeness to God's attributes. Chapter 5 of Matthew ends with, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect". The "only begotten Son of God" (John 1:18) in this context conveys the spiritual perfection of Christ.

There are also many passages in the New Testament, which relate to the Old Testament usage of royal sonship. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is addressed to by an angel in these words: "And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David" (Luke 1:31-32). The connection to the Old Testament where David is addressed

by God as "You are my son, today I have begotten you" (Ps. 2:7) is evident.

The royal sonship usage is also apparent in the Aramaic title *Masih* (Messiah, the anointed one), by which his followers frequently addressed him. The word 'Christ' derives from a Greek translation of this title (*Christos*) and is interchangeable with 'Messiah'. Peter, the first disciple of Jesus, states that, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Math. 16:16), which can equally be translated as "Thou art the Messiah, the Son of the living God". The same link is made by a high priest who questioned Jesus by asking, "I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God" (Matth. 26: 63, Luke 14:61). Here it is clear that many who came into contact with Jesus expected him to be a King like David, who had been anointed with "holy oil" (Ps 89: 20).

Jesus made it clear that he was only partially the 'Messiah' of Jewish tradition. In response to Pilate's question, "Art thou the King of the Jews", he stated "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18: 35-36). The other Gospels for the same passage report Jesus replying, "Thou sayest it" (Luke 23: 3, Mark 15: 2, Matth. 27: 11). In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus affirms he is the Messiah to Peter (Matth. 16: 17), but for the corresponding passage in the Gospels of Mark and Luke, Jesus instructs his disciples to "tell no man" (Mark 8: 30, Luke 9: 18).

2. The Son of Man

The Son of Man title occurs a total of 77 times in the New Testament, compared to the Son of God title that appears about 40 times, and is the most frequent way by which Jesus refers to himself.

The "Son of Man" was an Aramaic expression, "Bar nasha", which "was a synonym for 'man', and a substitute for the indefinite pronoun"². It has several usages in the Old Testament. In Ezekiel, it is used to denote a simple 'human being'; in Psalm 8, it means a man weak and insignificant,

² Geza Vermes, "Jesus the Jew", SCM Press Ltd, London, 1983, p 176

but destined for authority second only to that of God; in the visions of Daniel (Dan. 7: 13-22), after four beasts which symbolise successive despotic empires, comes "one like a Son of Man" (Dan. 7: 13), signifying the "saints of the Most High" (Dan. 7:18) to whom God is about to entrust his judgement and his kingdom.

While the Son of God is a generic term which was not only used for Christ but for King David, and sons of God were used for the Jewish people, collectively and individually, the Son of Man title is much more specific. In its highest sense, it denoted the figure whom the Jewish people believed would usher in the Kingdom of God on earth.

The references in the New Testament are all consistent with the Old Testament usage. In the sense of "Bar Nasha" or simple "human being", an example can be found in the reply Jesus makes to a scribe who offers to follow him, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head" (Matth. 8:20, cf. Luke 9:58). It is interesting to note that to the question posed by the high priest Caiaphas asking whether Jesus was the "Messiah, Son of God" (Matth. 26: 63), Jesus responds by saying, "Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter thou shall ye see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven". (Matth. 26: 64, Mark 14: 62, Luke 22: 69). Here Jesus does not affirm or reject the Messiah title, instead, he refers to the "Son of Man" mentioned by the prophet Daniel, who will come "with the clouds of heaven" (Daniel 7:13). Whether he himself will be this Son of Man to come, is not clear. But there can be no doubt that Jesus shows more concern for the coming of the Kingdom of God, than in engaging in disputes about the titles attributed to him.

3. The Word of God

Just as there are occasions of Jesus declaring his unity with God, there are as many instances where a clear distinction between Jesus and the Father is made. Citing the "abomination of desolation" (Mark 13: 14) spoken of by the prophet Daniel, Jesus states that: "But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son,

but the Father" (Mark 13: 32). When someone refers to Jesus as "Good Master", Jesus responds by saying, "Why callest me thou good? there is none good but one, that is God" (Mark 10:18). In John's Gospel Jesus makes clear this distinction when he states quite categorically that, "for the Father is greater than I" (John 14: 28). These passages suggest that Jesus was not in any way co-equal with God.

It might be argued that there is evidence to support the declaration of the Nicene Creed in the opening words of St John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:1-4). This passage indicates that Jesus was pre-existent to creation, God's co-creator, and the eternal instrument of God's revelation. But is this enough to make Jesus co-substantial with God, the 'God from God, Light from Light' in the Nicene Creed?

How would the Jews living in the first century A.D. have interpreted the 'Word of God as mentioned in John's Gospel? It would not have sounded so unique, since in their own tradition there was already an example of eternal co-existence with God in the form of 'Wisdom'. Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus and a well known Jewish Neoplatonist philosopher, equated Wisdom with the Word (*Logos* in Greek) of God³.

In Jewish tradition, 'Wisdom' is personified as a female figure, (*hokhma* in Hebrew and *Sophia* in Greek), who was "brought up" with God, who was with God before creation, whose "delights were with the sons of men". In Proverbs it is stated that: "I lead in the way of righteousness, in the midst of the paths of judgement: "The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths I was brought forth....When he prepared the heavens, I was there....Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; Rejoicing in the habitable part of

³ Thomas Sheehan, "The First Coming", Marboro Books, USA, 1990, p 211

his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men. Now therefore hearken unto me, O ye children: for blessed are they that keep my ways... For whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord" (Proverbs 8: 20-35). This description of Wisdom, as the eternal mediatrix of God's revelation and creation, bears striking resemblance to the attributes of the "Word of God" in John's Gospel.

Further evidence to support this view comes from the wider source of ancient Jewish writings. From the Wisdom of Solomon writings, part of the Apocrypha, accepted to be canonical by Roman Catholics and Orthodox churches, Wisdom is described in such words: "like a fine mist she rises from the power of God, a clear effulgence from the glory of the Almighty; so nothing defiled can enter her by stealth. She is the radiance that streams from everlasting light, the flawless mirror of the active power of God, and the image of his goodness. She is but one, yet can do all things; herself unchanging, she makes all things new; age after age she enters into holy souls, and makes them friends of God and prophets" (Wisdom 7: 25-27).

Here Wisdom is stated to periodically enter the world, and incarnate in the lives of "holy souls". Wisdom in these writings is described as the source of creation, whose "skill made all things" (Wisdom 7: 22).

On the basis of such beliefs, an elaborate myth of Wisdom was created in ancient Jewish tradition: Wisdom was first God's companion in heaven, then she became a medium for his revelation. Rejected by mankind, she returned back to dwell with God in heaven again. This myth is depicted in the writings of Enoch, part of the Jewish Pseudepigrapha composed during the last two centuries B.C., "Wisdom found no place in which she could dwell, but a dwelling place was found for her in the heavens. The Wisdom went forth to dwell with the children of the people, but she found no dwelling place. So Wisdom returned to her own place, and she settled permanently among the angels"⁴.

John's Gospel elaborates a theme already known to the Jews and does not make Jesus God's equal. The early Christians were also aware of it, as

⁴ 1 Enoch chapter 42: 1-2, quoted by T. Sheehan, *The First Coming*, p 211

apparent in the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews in which it is written, "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds" (Hebrews 1:1-2).

4. The Virgin Birth

Another piece of evidence that is sometimes used to support the belief that Jesus was of the same substance of God, "God of God", is the manner by which he was conceived by his mother Mary. How would the Jews have understood the virgin birth? Did it establish proof of Jesus as the Son of God in a physical sense?

In the Old Testament, there are several instances where prophets are born from divine intervention. The legendary births of Isaac, Jacob and Samuel were all cases where their respective mother's incapacity to give birth was healed by acts of divine intervention. In Jewish tradition, miraculous births were a distinguishing sign for someone destined to become important.

The New Testament records that the prophet John the Baptist also was conceived by an act of divine intervention. In fact when an Angel informs Mary that she will bear a child, and Mary replies that, "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" (Luke 1: 34), the Angel cites the case of Elizabeth, John the Baptist's mother, who was pregnant even though she was of "old age". The Angel says, "And behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible" (Luke 1: 36-37). These last words echo the words addressed to Sarah, mother of Isaac, who was also barren, when she laughed about the possibility of her bearing a child. In Genesis it is recorded that God replied "Is there any thing too hard for the Lord?" (Gen. 18: 14). The New Testament record of the miraculous birth is entirely consistent with Old Testament tradition and was unlikely to have suggested to the Jews that Jesus was sired by God.

Another example of a miraculous birth connected with the Son of God is to be found in the story of the high priest Melchisedec mentioned in the books of Genesis (14: 18-20) and Psalms (110: 4). In the New Testament great respect is paid to Melchisedec, who is described as "priest of the Most high God" and "King of peace" (Hebrews 7: 1-2), and of whom it is written that he was, "without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God; abideth a priest continually" (Hebrews 7: 3). Jesus is identified to be the "priest forever after the order of Melchisedec" as prophesied in Psalms 110: 4 (cf. Hebrews 7: 17), and therefore the virgin birth of Jesus would have been accepted by the newly converted Jews to be entirely in keeping with the high rank of priesthood attributed to him.

5. Christ and the Gentiles

After the death of Jesus, his brother James led the church in Jerusalem, and Peter gave his approval to teach the Gospel to the Gentiles. But it was the apostle Paul, a Hellenistic Jewish convert, who became the chief missionary to the Gentiles. What was Paul's message to the Gentiles? Did he teach that Jesus was co-equal with God?

It is clear from the letters of Paul that he interprets the sonship of Jesus in a symbolic sense, one which is more by adoption rather than of the same substance as God. For Paul, those who received the "Spirit of God" were "sons of God". In fact Paul refers to the followers of Jesus as God's "joint heirs with Christ". He states that, "For as many are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit by adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may also be glorified together" (Romans 8:14-17, Gal. 4: 4-7).

Paul never stated Jesus was God, but several times he refers to him as the "image of God" (2 Col. 4:4), "the brightness of his glory, and express image of his person" (Hebrews 1: 3, cf. Col. 1: 15, 2 Cor. 4:4). He also refers to Christ as the "first born of every creature", and adds that, "For

by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible. And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence" (Col. 1: 15-18). Here, there are elements of the Wisdom myth, where Jesus is considered to be the instrument of creation. It is clear that "first born of every creature" here refers to both "pre-eminence" as well as pre-existence in time, but it is particularly his importance with respect to his God-like qualities which is emphasised. Speaking in relation to the "Father", Paul states that in Jesus "Should all fullness dwell" (Col. 1:19). This means that Jesus was considered to be a full reflection of God, while his servants, were understood to be imperfect images of God.

How did the Gentiles understand the person of Jesus? Did they understand him in the sense taught by Paul, to be the full reflection of God's image? The Gentile world was largely polytheist, and the Jewish insistence on the unity and fatherhood of God, Who historically chose the Jewish people to be His "children" was a difficult message for them to assimilate.

There are indications in the New Testament that the polytheism of the Gentiles presented a serious obstacle to their acceptance of the Christian message. From Acts 14: 6-19 the reaction of the Gentiles to the preaching of the Gospel is made clear. It describes how once Paul and Barnabas, another believer, went to Lystra in Lycaonia and they saw a man "cripple from his mother's womb". "Perceiving that he had faith to be healed" they ordered him to walk "and when the people saw what Paul had done" they said "the gods are come down to us in the likeness of men. And they called Barnabas, Jupiter and Paul, Mercurius, because he was the chief speaker." Then they started offering sacrifices and Paul and Barnabas rent their clothes and ran among them saying "we also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein... And with these sayings scarce restrained they the people, that they had not done sacrifice unto them". This passage indicates the kind of difficulties that the early Christian apostles had in spreading the Gospel to the Gentile world. Here, Paul and Barnabas had to vigorously deny being gods after healing a cripple. Not only were they

thought to be gods incarnate in human form, but they were associated with the specific deities of Jupiter and Mercurius.

The New Testament records a story concerning Herod Agrippa I, governor of Judea (41-4 A.D.), Herod the Great's grandson, who was punished by God for not denying himself to be a god (Acts 12:1-23). Herod attended the quadrennial Roman games at Caesarea, appearing in dazzling robes of silver and, addressing the people there, "made an oration unto them". The crowd were so impressed by his "royal apparel", that they said it is "a voice of a god, and not a man". Herod failed to reprove them, and as a result, received divine chastisement, "And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the Ghost".

The story of Herod illustrates how easily the pagans could acclaim that a man was a god. It also indicates how the early apostles considered it to be a fatal blasphemy for a Jew to think in these terms. The Son of God title was also apt to cause confusion. It was used for the Ptolemaic King of Egypt, son of the sun god Helios, and also for the Emperor of Rome, who from Augustus onwards bears the titles, 'Son of God', 'son of Zeus'⁵. There was even a story about Alexander the Great, who is credited as being a half-human half god hybrid. He was said to have been conceived through the god Zeus before his parents had consummated their marriage, and was known as the Son of Zeus⁶.

The beliefs of the pagan population to whom the early Christian apostles preached were characterised with a varied mixture of Greek myths and mystery cults. The old Greek mystery religions of Demeter, Dionysos and Orpheus were augmented by still others coming from the East such as the cults of Isis and Osiris from Egypt, of Cybele and Atilis from Phrygia, of Atargatis and Adonis from Syria, and later from Persia, the religion of the Aryan deity Mithra. These beliefs were expressed in the form of rites and ceremonies where the participants associated themselves with a god who

⁵ G. Vermes, "Jesus the Jew", p 199

⁶ E. P. Sanders, "The Historical Figure of Jesus". Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth (England), 1995, p 243

died or disappeared, and who then either returned to life or in some other way shared divine power with the initiates⁷.

The early Christians were not immune to the mystery cult influence, and many Gentiles who converted to the Christian message integrated it into their own myths. One such group was the Christian Gnostics, who based their beliefs on the secret sayings of Christ and produced their own versions of the recorded gospel⁸. They believed themselves to be the chosen elects for which the Gospel had come, and did not accept the authority of the churches. They linked Jesus to a variety of different forms of personal experience in other traditions and de-emphasised his appearance as a historical figure who lived and preached amongst the Jews. Some groups of Gnostics were so extreme in this respect, such as the Docetists, that they even denied that Jesus had ever appeared in human form, they maintained that Christ had been pure spirit⁹.

The early Christian leaders were at pains to eliminate Gnostic beliefs from within their own churches. There are clear signs of this in the New Testament. In the first epistle of the apostle John, it is stated: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God. And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of anti-Christ, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world" (1 John 4:1-3). Here John is providing a test by which Gnostic beliefs from within the Church can be outlawed.

6. The Council of Nicea

During the second century A.D., there emerged two schools of thought about the nature of Jesus. The church based in Alexandria began to

⁷ see T. Sheehan, *The First Coming*, p 206-209

⁸ Ian Wilson, "Jesus: The Evidence", p 24-5

⁹ *ibid.*, p 129-130

preach that Jesus was never bounded by the normal physical constraints of men. Bishop Clement of Alexandria stated that Jesus only "took food and ate it in order that we should not teach about him in a Docetic fashion"¹⁰. In the third century A.D, the Alexandrian church came much closer to a theology based upon the belief that Jesus was God incarnate. Archdeacon Athanasius, later to become the city's bishop, wrote "The Word disguised himself by appearing in a body... by the works he did in the body showed himself to be, not man, but God"¹¹.

Meanwhile, the church based at Antioch, whose jurisdiction included the birthplace of Jesus, accepted the divinity of Jesus without suggesting that he was in any way co-equal to God. Bishop Lucian of Antioch for instance (about a century after Christ), had taught that the message of Jesus was more important than the theology surrounding the nature of Jesus. By the beginning of the third century A.D, the priest Arius, taught by Lucian and excommunicated by Alexandria's Bishop, Alexander, brought the theological dispute between the two churches to a breaking point. The dispute was sufficiently intractable that Emperor Constantine was called upon to adjudicate. He decided to hold a council in Nicea to heal the divisions between the Bishops.

It might seem odd that a political leader played such an important role in what was essentially a theological issue. Constantine had not yet even converted to the Christian faith when the council of Nicea took place. So why was Constantine's authority sought on the matter? The answer might lie in the way Constantine captured Rome more than a decade earlier. According to legend, on the basis of a premonition, he had ordered his soldiers to paint the Greek letters Chi-Rho on their shields in a monogram that had been adopted by the Christians as a symbol of their belief. Most probably this was a way to obtain the support from a group on the other side of the walls of an otherwise impregnable city. In any case, from the day of his successful conquest of Rome, as is well known, Constantine became a champion of the Christian cause and greatly assisted in its growth, stopping the persecutions against the Christians. As emperor of

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p 138

¹¹ *ibid.*

the recently re-unified Roman Empire, the quarrel between the churches of Antioch and Alexandria was an important concern.

At Nicea, the two rival Christian groups fought for days on the formula to adopt as a creed for the believers, and it was Constantine who resolved the issue by taking sides with the Alexandrian church. Very few delegates at the assembly were able to directly oppose the pressure exerted by the Emperor, but later, some expressed regret at having signed the Nicene formula. A group of Bishops who attended the Council, later wrote a letter to Constantine confessing that, "We committed an impious act, O Prince, by subscribing to a blasphemy from fear of you"¹².

What prompted Constantine to support the Alexandrian view is difficult to say. But it is clear that the notion of a man being an incarnation of a god was not unfamiliar to him. The deification of a man for Constantine was nothing special. His father had already been deified, and he would be accorded the same honour after his own death.

7. A Bahá'í perspective

The Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi states that, "As to the position of Christianity, let it be stated without any hesitation or equivocation that its divine origin is unconditionally acknowledged, that the Sonship and Divinity of Jesus Christ are fearlessly asserted"¹³. At the same time, Shoghi Effendi writes, "that invisible yet rational God Who, however much we extol the divinity of His Manifestations on earth, can in no wise incarnate His infinite, His unknowable, His incorruptible and all-embracing Reality in the concrete and limited frame of a mortal being. Indeed, the God Who could so incarnate His own reality would, in the light of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, cease immediately to be God"¹⁴.

¹² *ibid.*, p 142

¹³ Shoghi Effendi, "The Promised Day has Come", Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette (USA), 1980, p 109-110

¹⁴ Shoghi Effendi, "The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh", Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette (USA), 1974, p 112

If the Incarnation Doctrine is rejected, what is the Bahá'í understanding of the opening passage of John's Gospel which states that, "In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God..."? 'Abdu'l-Bahá' explains it in terms of a mirror analogy: "The Spirit and the Word mean the divine perfections that appeared in the Reality of Christ, and these perfections were with God; so the sun manifests all its glory in the mirror. For the Word does not signify the body of Christ, no, but the divine perfections manifested in Him. For Christ was like a clear mirror which was facing the Sun of Reality; and the perfections of the Sun of Reality - that is to say, its light and heat - were visible and apparent in this mirror. If we look into the mirror, we see the sun, and we say, "it is the sun"¹⁵. 'Abdu'l-Bahá goes on to state, "That is why Christ says in the Gospel, "The Father is in the Son" (John 14:11, 17:21) - that is to say, the Sun of Reality appears in the mirror"¹⁶.

These passages suggest that Christ was more than an inspired man. The perfect mirror is innately different to other objects. All objects scatter and reflect the sun's light to some extent, and indeed each object is in its own way a sign of the sun, or 'image' of the sun. The spotless mirror however, in this sense is pre-eminent among all objects. Likewise, Jesus is pre-eminent in creation, because in his life and teachings, God's image is reflected more fully than anywhere else. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that, "the perfections of Christ are called the Word because all the beings are in the condition of letters, and one letter has not complete meaning, while perfections of Christ have the power of the word because a complete meaning can be inferred from a word"¹⁷.

Another aspect of the Word of God is that it periodically incarnates in human form to spiritually regenerate mankind. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that, "Before appearing in the human form, the Word of God was in the utmost sanctity and glory, existing in perfect beauty and splendour in the height of its magnificence. When through the wisdom of God the Most High it

¹⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá', "Some Answered Questions", Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1984, p 206

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p 207

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p 206-7

shone from the heights of glory in the world of the body..."¹⁸. In his tablet of Wisdom, Bahá'u'lláh states that the "Word of God is the cause which hath preceded the contingent world - a world which is adorned with the splendours of the Ancient of Days, yet is being renewed and regenerated at all times"¹⁹.

The Bahá'í approach to the true nature of Christ is not only consistent with the Word of God in the New Testament, but also with the Wisdom (Sophia) of the Old Testament. Bahá'u'lláh refers to a female figure as the "Maid of Heaven"²⁰ who is sent down to reflect the "beauteous image of the Almighty" in "all created things" and with whom a covenant was made from "time immemorial"²¹. There is also a striking parallel in Bahá'u'lláh's 'Tablet of the Holy Mariner' with the passage from Enoch already quoted, which describes the journey of Wisdom amongst men, her subsequent rejection and return to heaven⁴. Referring to one of the "maidens of heaven", Bahá'u'lláh writes that she "...descended with such an adorning as to illumine the heavens and all that is therein...When she reached that place she rose to her full height in the midmost heart of creation...and sought to inhale their fragrance at a time that knoweth neither beginning nor end...she found not in them that which she did desire... she then cried aloud, wailed and repaired to her own station within her most lofty mansion..."²².

In fact, from the Bahá'í perspective, all the founders of the world's major religions are incarnations of the Word of God in human form.

A brief mention here will be given about the Bahá'í view of the Virgin Birth. Shoghi Effendi writes, "on this point, as on several others, the Bahá'í Teachings are in full agreement with the doctrines of the Catholic

¹⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá', "Some Answered Questions, p 117

¹⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, "Writings of Bahá'u'lláh", Bahá'í Publishing Trust, India, 1986, p 241

²⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, "Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh", Bahá'í Publishing Trust, London, 1978, p 91, p 281, p 283

²¹ *ibid.*, p282

²² Bahá'u'lláh, from the 'Tablet of the Holy Mariner', "Writings of Bahá'u'lláh", Bahá'í Publishing Trust, India, 1986, p 716

Church. In the "Kitab-i-Iqan" (Book of Certitude)²³, and a few other Tablets unpublished, Bahá'u'lláh confirms, however indirectly, the Catholic conception of the Virgin Birth. Also, 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the book "Some Answered Questions", explicitly states that "Christ found existence through the Spirit of God"²⁴ which statement necessarily implies, when viewed in light of the text, that Jesus was not the son of Joseph²⁵. This passage suggests that the Virgin Birth was in some sense, a miraculous event. Furthermore, Shoghi Effendi states that, "the possibility of miracles has never been rejected in the Teachings. Their importance, however, has been minimized"²⁶.

As already mentioned in section 4 of this paper, there are other examples of miraculous births associated with prophets and holy men in the Old and New Testament, and Jesus' fatherless birth was not unique. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá', "The honor and greatness of Christ is not due to the fact that He did not have a human father, but to His perfections, bounties and divine glory. If the greatness of Christ is His being fatherless, then Adam is greater than Christ, for He had neither father or mother"²⁷. This passage indicates that the importance of the Virgin Birth lies mainly in its spiritual symbolism. As written in the Gospel of John, "but as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). If this is true for believers, how much more so for Christ, who was the perfect "image of God" (2 Col. 4:4) and the "first born of every creature" (Col. 1:15).

²³ Bahá'u'lláh, "Kitab-i-Iqan" (Book of Certitude), Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1974, p 56

²⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá', "Some Answered Questions", chap. 12, p 63

²⁵ From a letter on behalf of the Guardian dated October 14, 1935, quoted in "Lights of Guidance", compiled by Helen Hornby, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, India, 1983, p 366-7

²⁶ *ibid.*, from a letter on behalf of the Guardian dated Dec. 31, 1937, p 366

²⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá', "Some Answered Questions". chap. 18, p 89

8. Conclusion

The theological debates about the nature of Jesus are still continuing, long after the Nicene Creed was signed. The issue still appears to divide Christians into separate, irreconcilable ideological groups. "The Myth of God Incarnate"²⁸, a collection of essays edited by John Hick, when first published in Britain in 1977 immediately set off a theological controversy, received hostile reviews both in the religious and secular press, and was answered within six weeks by "The Truth of God Incarnate" and later by "God Incarnate"²⁹. In addition, a call was made by the Church of England Evangelical Council that the five Anglican authors should resign their orders³⁰. So intense was the controversy that another book only two years after the first was brought out entitled, "Incarnation and Myth: The debate continued" which contained essays by the first book's authors and some of their critics³¹.

It is unlikely that more theology will resolve the issue of the great mystery of the sonship of Jesus and his divinity. On the other hand, it is Christ's life and teachings that provide the clearest 'image' of God. This meaning of the sonship of Jesus is acceptable to people from all religious traditions. It would surely have been accepted by the great Hindu saint Mahatma Ghandi, who describes Jesus in the following way, "To me he was one of the greatest teachers humanity has ever had. To his believers he was God's only begotten son. Could the fact that I do or do not accept this belief have any more or less influence in my life? Is all the grandeur of his teaching and his doctrine to be forbidden to me? I cannot believe so ... My interpretation... is that in Jesus' own life is the key to his nearness to God; that he expressed, as no other could, the spirit and will of God. It is in this sense that I see and recognise him as the son of God"³².

²⁸ John Hick, "The Myth of God Incarnate", SCM Press limited, 1977, London

²⁹ Michael Goulder, "Incarnation and Myth: The debate continued", SCM Press Limited, London, 1979, p vii

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*

³² Ian Wilson, "Jesus: The Evidence", p 153

References

"The Holy Bible"

Authorised King's James version, Collins' Clear -Type Press, Glasgow (Scotland) 1975

The Wisdom of Solomon

"Sacred Writings, Christianity: The Apocrypha and the New Testament", edited by Jaroslav Pelikan, History Book Club, New York, 1992, p 76-89