



THE INCARNATION: HONOR DESCENDS TO SHAME

*Though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the form of a servant,
being born in the likeness of men.
- Philippians 2:6-7*

Having existed from the creation of the world, Jesus Christ became a human being born through the Virgin Mary in Israel around 4 B.C. The incarnation is the event when the preexistent being became the historical Jesus of Nazareth, taking on human flesh. In the select New Testament passages that allude to it, the incarnation is understood as the event in which Jesus went from honor to shame. Having existed for eternity past in full honor and glory, Jesus assumed upon himself the lowly and shameful state of a mere human being. Through voluntary self-abasement, Jesus accepted the frailty, defilement, and shame inherent to all humans. Preexistent glory assumed shame, to restore human honor.

PREEXISTENT GLORY

The most explicit passages regarding Christ's preexistent state attribute to him a clear role in the creation of the world. The "all things" which were created by, through, and for Jesus is the following verses was a common way of speaking about the entire universe, the totality of all created entities.¹

- "He (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:15-17).
- "There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Cor 8:6).
- "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:1-3).

¹ James Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 267.

By linking Jesus with the creation of the universe before his earthly ministry, these passages are some of the most honorific in the New Testament. Jesus is the benefactor of creation – without his power and provision, creation would not exist or survive. By using the language of divine Wisdom from Jewish literature (cf. Wisdom of Solomon 10:20; 11:10, 13, 17, 21-26), Jesus is presented as an aspect of the divine nature worthy to be honored with praise. Still other passages connote Jesus' honorable preexistent status apart from the language of creation and wisdom.

John 17:5 clearly assumes Jesus' preexistent honor and glory– “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.” Jesus asks the Father to return to him his previous position of glory, to exchange humility for honor. This prayer, ultimately answered in Jesus' death and resurrection, is a request to reverse the adverse social effects of the incarnation where Jesus relinquished the honor and glory he possessed before the creation of the world.

ASSUMED SHAMED

Two passages (Phil 2:6-8, 2 Cor 8:9) mention Jesus' preexistent honor for the purpose of establishing Jesus' tremendous sacrifice in freely relinquishing his honorable status. Since these texts contrast Jesus' pre-incarnation and post-incarnations status, it is critical to observe how the concepts of honor and shame are central to both.

The great Christological hymn of Philippians 2:5-11 is instrumental for understanding each aspect of Jesus' life in terms of honor and shame, but only the lines related to the incarnation will be discussed. “Though he (Jesus) was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil 2:6-7). Five aspects of the incarnation process are identified; though notoriously difficult to exegete, these statements are crucial for forming a proper theology of the incarnation.

Firstly, Jesus “was in the form of God.” Debate has raged about whether the *morphe theou* possessed by Jesus is divine essence or the ‘image of God’ granted to Adam at creation (Gen 1:26-27). Rather than try to understand the phrase as some sort of ontological essence (of either deity or humanness), “the form of God” is best understood as a mode of divine existence attributable to Jesus – God's glory.² The glory and honor which God has eternally possessed and graciously bestowed upon Adam at creation was fully present in Jesus before the incarnation. Jesus possesses the divine attributes which makes God the God who he is – honor and glory. This interpretation emphasizes the honorable status enjoyed by Jesus and understands “the form of God” in relation to both God and Adam, as the hymn likely intended.

Having the honorable social status of God, Jesus did not “count equality with God a thing to be grasped (*harpagmon*).” The theological significance of this clause depends on another notoriously confusing term. *Harpagmon* can mean “an active act of robbery” (unlikely in this case), or the more

² George E. Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 459.



passive “hold fast what is already possessed.”³ Jesus, having existed in the form and glory of God and possessing an equally honorable status as God, is unlike the first Adam who desired to the full honor and status rightfully fit for the creator alone. “A heavenly figure who forgoes grasping at equality with God and voluntarily descends to a human life of servitude and obedience might have been seen as quite a telling contrast with the human Adam understood as having vainly sought to rise above his status as creature.”⁴ For a person to not abuse their honorable status for personal gain and voluntarily humble themselves is unheard in honor-shame cultures. A reputable social status is often manipulated to secure political positions or subvert justice; the honored often assume a divine right to plunder society.

Jesus on the other hand, willfully released the rights and privileges he possessed before the incarnation and “made himself nothing (*kenosis*)”, or “emptied himself.” The traditional *kenosis* theory holds that Christ “emptied himself” of some divine attributes, such as omniscience, omnipresence, or omnipotence, while he was on earth as a human to fulfill his redemptive task. Since such a view appears nowhere else in the NT or the first 1,800 years of church history. Rather, “the best understanding of this passage is that it talks about Jesus giving up the status and privilege that was his in heaven.”⁵ Christ “emptied himself” of his honorable social position, or “humbled himself” when he took “the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”

This final clause explicitly states how and when Jesus transitioned from honor to shame –his incarnation. Though having the honorable “form of God,” Jesus took the dishonorable “form of a servant;” the repetition of Jesus’ two “forms” highlights the disparity between his two social statuses. A servant, in contrast to God, was purposefully selected as the metaphor for capturing the shame and humility Jesus assumed. A servant is by definition one who has no inherent worth, value, or honor since their life is centered around serving those who do. Jesus became a humble servant when “being born in the likeness of men.” From the honor of God to the shame of men - nothing could be more radical or noteworthy. This is the story of a wealthy government official abandoning his private estate to live naked in slums as a homeless beggar. Whereas Westerners are likely to notice only the physical comforts lost or actually admire such personal sacrifice (i.e., the bestseller *City of Joy*), such a voluntary abandonment of an honorable social status is appalling and unconceivable in honor-shame contexts. Yet, this is exactly what happened when Jesus was born in humanity’s likeness according to Philippians 2:6-7.

Another critical verse for understanding Jesus’ shift from honor to shame at the incarnation is 2 Cor. 8:9 – “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.” Although the self-abasement through which the grace of Christ was mediated is typically identified specifically with the death

³ Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 460.

⁴ Larry Hurtado, “Pre-existence” in Hawthorne, Gerald F.; Martin, Ralph P.; and Reid, Daniel G.; eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 551.



and resurrection (Rom. 5:15, 21; Gal 2:20-21; Eph 1:6-7), Jesus' poverty in this passage is a general reference to his entire life, since his wealth can only be properly understood as a reference to his preexistent state. Jesus' earthly life was a life of literal poverty (Mark 10:28-30, Matt 8:20), a reflection of the social shame he endured as a human. What is significant for our theological purposes is that Jesus being "rich" then becoming "poor" is metaphorical language for the honor forfeited and shame assumed by the eternal Son of God at the incarnation. Such words are not a reference to the value of Jesus' financial estate, but his social value which undertook a radical transformation when he became a human. Paul uses financial language to capture the radical humility of Christ in the incarnation because of the immediate context speaking of generous giving towards the Jerusalem collection (2 Cor 8-9).

The exact nature of the shame Jesus assumed at the incarnation must be clarified. Jesus did not bear shame as a human being because he himself was shameful due to sin or defilement. Rather, the incarnation left Jesus in a position of dishonor and shame simply because he was a human being, and humans, especially when compared to the divine creator, have no honor or glory. To use a rather crude yet clear example, any person who became a rat, regardless of however honorable he was among his fellow rodents, would be shamed simply because he or she is a rat. So it is with Jesus, though he did not act shamefully as all humans do, he nevertheless bore the disgrace of being a human – the weak and feeble specie of creation formed from dirt. Shame, impurity, and disgrace are characteristics of humanity; to be human means to be associated with shame because it means sharing a common essence and identity with all the other humans who were born into shame and defilement then exacerbated the problem with their own disgrace and filth.

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

What is the theological and soteriological significance of Jesus incarnation?
Why did Jesus relinquish honor and assume shame?

Interestingly, the renowned New Testament scholar James D. G. Dunn, who is generally conservative in his interpretations, denies Christ's preexistence in the early church partially because scholars have been unable to articulate its meaning. "Too many have been content to conclude 'preexistence' without asking what that would have meant to Paul and his generation."⁶ Such an accusation is true; Jesus' incarnation plays virtually no role in most Christian theology. But the rubric of honor and shame presents a way to understand the incarnation as theologically significant for the early (and contemporary) church.

It is a well known axiom in honor-shame cultures that people cannot honor or lift themselves. Once one has been shamed, there is nothing they themselves can do to restore their honor. If an unmarried girl has spent the night in a man's presence or been raped, her honor is completely lost

⁶ Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 292.



so that her only hope in life is to become a prostitute or move to another country where she can start her life over again. However, there is potential means of status restoration for the shamed – a higher, honored person willing to associate with the shamed. Somebody higher must lift the shamed from the pit of disgrace.

Since the mission of Jesus' life was to restore humanity's divinely-granted honorable status, the incarnation was the essential first step because it brought Jesus to the level of the shamed who he came to save. Without the incarnation, which includes simply the idea of God becoming man but also the radical significance of the most honored being bearing the shame of a human being, humanity would be left to its own futile and powerless attempts to restore their own honor. The incarnation is theological significant, and necessary because it is the lone answer to our salvation from shame. Only someone with the infinite honor of God himself could bear the full shame of all those who believe in him; any finite creature is incapable of granting true, divine honor. Salvation is from God, and the whole message of the Bible is to show that all humans are radically dependent upon the Creator for any sense of honor. Having possessed full honor and experienced complete shame, Jesus is the only person capable of bridging the hopelessly desperate gap between the honorable God and shameful humans. The incarnation is the first step to the elimination of human defilement, alienation, exclusion, unfaithfulness, weakness, shame, and dishonor. In the incarnation, the honorable one enters into the presence of the shame with the intention of removing them from the disgraceful setting. Thus, if there is no incarnation, if there is no voluntarily humbling by the only real honorable person, then we have no salvation from shame and to honor.

