

Recapitulation and the Incarnation

One major theological issue wrestled with by early Christians was how could a God who was perfect spirit, be incarnated (lit., "en-fleshed") in the man Jesus. Already in the New Testament, we see affirmation of the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth laid down as a test of orthodoxy (i.e., right teaching). (John 4:2 "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.") This teaching was at the heart of theological disputes between "orthodox" Christians and a variety of heresies known as Gnostics. Writing in the mid-second-century, a Christian teacher named Irenaeus of Lyon appealed to the theology of recapitulation (Christ as the New Adam) and Christ as Victor to defend the orthodox teaching. Notice that for Irenaeus, the significance of Christ's work is not that he pays the debt of Adam's sin, but that he is a new type of human, a new "generation" who is in favor with God and who is victorious over the power of sin and death.

Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* (c. 180)

Book V, Chapter 1, paragraph 3

3. Vain also are the Ebionites, who do not receive by faith into their soul the union of God and man, but who remain in the old leaven of [the natural] birth, and who do not choose to understand that the Holy Ghost came upon Mary, and the power of the Most High did overshadow her: wherefore also what was generated is a holy thing, and the Son of the Most High God the Father of all, who effected the incarnation of this being, and showed forth a new [kind of] generation; that as by the former generation we inherited death, so by this new generation we might inherit life. Therefore do these men reject the commixture of the heavenly wine,¹ and wish it to be water of the world only, not receiving God so as to have union with Him, but they remain in that Adam who had been conquered and was expelled from Paradise: not considering that as, at the beginning of our formation in Adam, that breath of life which proceeded from God, having been united to what had been fashioned, animated the man, and manifested him as a being endowed with reason; so also, in [the times of] the end, the Word of the Father and the Spirit of God, having become united with the ancient substance of Adam's formation, rendered man living and perfect, receptive of the perfect Father, in order that as in the natural [Adam] we all were dead, so in the spiritual we may all be made alive. For never at any time did Adam escape the *hands* of God, to whom the Father speaking, said, "Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness." And for this reason in the last times (*fine*), not by the will of the flesh, nor by the will of man, but by the good pleasure of the Father, His hands formed a living man, in order that Adam might be created [again] after the image and likeness of God.

Book V, Chapter XXI, paragraph 1

¹ [Early Christians, like many Christians to this day, commonly mixed a little water with the wine at the eucharist (i.e., the Lord's Supper). This was taken to symbolize the two natures of Christ divine (wine) and human (water). Accordingly, groups such as the Ebionites who thought that Christ was divine only and not truly incarnate refused to mix water with the wine.]

1. He has therefore, in His work of recapitulation, summed up all things, both waging war against our enemy, and crushing him who had at the beginning led us away captives in Adam, and trampled upon his head, as thou canst perceive in Genesis that God said to the serpent, "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; He shall be on the watch for (*observabit*) thy head, and thou on the watch for His heel." For from that time, He who should be born of a woman, [namely] from the Virgin, after the likeness of Adam, was preached as keeping watch for the head of the serpent. This is the seed of which the apostle says in the Epistle to the Galatians, "that the law of works was established until the seed should come to whom the promise was made." This fact is exhibited in a still clearer light in the same Epistle, where he thus speaks: "But when the fulness of time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman." For indeed the enemy would not have been fairly vanquished, unless it had been a man [born] of a woman who conquered him. For it was by means of a woman that he got the advantage over man at first, setting himself up as man's opponent. And therefore does the Lord profess Himself to be the Son of man, comprising in Himself that original man out of whom the woman was fashioned (*ex quo ea quae secundum mulierem est plasmatio facta est*), in order that, as our species went down to death through a vanquished man, so we may ascend to life again through a victorious one; and as through a man death received the palm [of victory] against us, so again by a man we may receive the palm against death.

The complete work from which this text is taken may be accessed via the Christian Classics Ethereal Library at <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/TOC.htm> (Jan. 22, 2001).