

1 Introduction

The doctrine of the Incarnation is the teaching that Jesus Christ, the human crucified under Pontius Pilate, was truly God, one person of the Blessed Trinity. That doctrine, affirmed by the orthodox statements of faith from the early church through the later Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant doctrinal statements, teaches that this person, while truly God, became truly human, a human like other humans in all ways except sin, for the sake of saving humans from their sins and bringing them to perfect union with God. This doctrine is a fundamental part of any traditional Christian teaching – if it is false, so is traditional Christianity.

While we may have become accustomed to it, the doctrine of the Incarnation is a shocking claim. How could God become human? How could one person be two seemingly incompatible types of things at the same time? If God is conceptualized in the traditional sense as immutable, impassible, and simple, how could such a person *become* changeable, affectable, and complex, as all humans are? And *why*? Why would God do such a thing as to become human?

1.1 Methodology

The Incarnation has been analyzed from multiple perspectives. For instance, do the Christian Scriptures imply that Jesus is true God, one in being with the Father?¹ Does the historical record give justification for belief in the existence of the flesh-and-blood human named “Jesus,” son of Mary? Do the early theologians affirm the doctrine? And so on. All of these scriptural and historical questions are worthy of analysis. This short Element, situated as it is in a series on the philosophy of religion, does not address these questions. Rather, it focuses on the *philosophical* questions surrounding the doctrine. Such philosophical analysis no doubt assumes some findings of these other methods of assessment. For instance, it assumes, for the sake of argument, that the human, Jesus, did exist.² But it does not and could not, given length constraints, responsibly enter into the other discussions.

While this Element focuses exclusively on the philosophical questions concerning the Incarnation, its work cannot be done in a historical vacuum. The doctrine of the Incarnation was formulated in a series of ecumenical councils – the context of the statements of those councils must be taken into account to understand the meaning they had for those speakers. This Element makes

¹ The biblical justification for the doctrine of the Incarnation is vitally important. This Element is not the place to enter into that vast literature. It is impossible to provide a brief set of paradigmatic references to the ocean of literature on the biblical case for the doctrine of the Incarnation. I suggest the reader start with Bird et al. (2014), Loke (2019), and Tilling (2015) and follow the footnotes into the wider literature.

² For scholarship on the historical case for the existence of Jesus, see Ehrman (2013).

frequent reference to the doctrinal statements of these councils concerning the Incarnation.

Many of the philosophers who have considered the philosophical questions concerning the Incarnation have done so from a specific heritage. For instance, many who believe in the Incarnation would be reluctant to affirm something that contradicts the teachings of the ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in AD 451. Likewise, many who object to the Incarnation want their objections to target the traditional teaching and would see it as a misfire if their objections showed that a view of the Incarnation not held by anyone in Christian history is incoherent. For this reason, this Element notes whether a certain line of philosophical thought is precluded by the orthodox statements concerning the Incarnation. Throughout I make use of the excellent translation edited by Norman Tanner (1990), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*. In the hopes of providing some evidence that I have not interpreted these texts in a nontraditional manner, I have sought out and received a *Nihil Obstat* and *Imprimatur* on this Element from my local Catholic diocese, the Diocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis.

A note on language: the word “orthodox” is often used as a term of praise, and its contrary, “nonorthodox” or “heretical,” is often used as a term of derision. In this work, “orthodox” is stripped of such resonance, and I make no use of “heretical” at all. (Here I’ve *mentioned* it twice.³) As I use the term, orthodox teaching is that which is endorsed in the earliest seven ecumenical councils, and a proposition is “nonorthodox” when it is proscribed by those same councils. The reader will see that these definitions leave a large middle ground: things neither taught nor proscribed by those councils, for instance, the claim that Christ knew English. There is debate about what ought to count as orthodox. I have no room here to enter into that debate. I stipulate instead a meaning that I think finds consensus throughout the history of Christian thought.

This Element presents the Christology promulgated by the first seven ecumenical councils of Christianity: the First Council of Nicaea in 325, the First Council of Constantinople in 381, the Council of Ephesus in 431, the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the Second Council of Constantinople in 553, the Third Council of Constantinople in 680–681, and the Second Council of Nicaea in 787. I refer to the Christology of these councils as *Conciliar Christology*.

A final point about method: this Element speaks in a factive voice, as if the Incarnation in fact occurred. Appending “according to Conciliar Christology” or the like to each sentence would be tiresome for both author and reader. The reader who does not affirm the Incarnation and who finds such factive

³ For helpful reflection on the concepts of “orthodoxy” and “heresy,” see Stump (1999).

presentation unpalatable ought to treat the remainder of this Element as resting on an assumption made for the sake of argument. Assume that the world is as the Christians have believed, and that there was an Incarnation. In fact, we don't even need so strong an assumption. We can simply assume the *possible truth* of the doctrine and still let this Element do its work.

1.2 What the Doctrine of the Incarnation Says

The teachings of Conciliar Christology can be organized under five topical headings: the person of Christ, the divine nature of Christ, the human nature of Christ, the union between the two natures (i.e., the *hypostatic* union), and the activities of the God-man, Jesus Christ. In this Introduction, I offer an initial comment about conciliar teaching on these five topics.

To the first point: Jesus Christ is one person, the Second Person of the Trinity, referred to also as “the Son” and “the Word.” There are not two persons in the Incarnation, one divine and the other human. Rather, there is one person who is both truly divine and truly human because this one person had and has two distinct natures.

To the second point: one of those natures was the one and only divine nature, which Jesus possessed with and no less than the Father and the Holy Spirit. God the Son made human, Jesus, was immutable and impassible in virtue of the divine nature. His incarnation in no sense diminished his possession of that divine nature.

To the third point: the other nature was a human nature that the Son took up into himself in the Incarnation (the technical term is *assumed*). In virtue of this human nature Christ was like us in all ways, sin alone excluded.

To the fourth point: these two natures were united in a unique manner. This union is traditionally referred to as the *hypostatic union*. It is *hypostatic*, insofar as the union occurs in the person of the Son, and *person*, as we see in Section 2.2, is a species of the genus, *hypostasis*. It is this hypostatic union between the natures that allows for the Communication of Idioms (*Communicatio Idiomatum*), the true description of the one person using a subject term drawn from one nature and a predicate term drawn from another. To give a common example, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:8 that the leaders of the world crucified the Lord of glory. Here the “Lord of glory” (a term correct of Christ in virtue of his divinity) is “crucified” (a term correct of Christ in virtue of his humanity).

To the fifth point: Christ died, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. He willed. He knew. Many questions arise from such observations. How can it be that God dies? Did he will evil? *Could* he have willed evil? Could he have been tempted? Could he have been mistaken?

1.3 The Main Metaphysical Problem

Predicating terms of one and the same person drawn from two different natures leads to difficulties, as the councils themselves make evident. The traditional documents of Christianity assert both classical theistic attributes of Christ (e.g., impassible, immutable) and also mundane human attributes (e.g., suffered, changed). Sometimes, as we see in Section 7.1, they predicate both apparently contradictory predicates of Christ in the very same sentence!

It is these apparent contradictions in attributes that lead to what has been called the Fundamental Philosophical Problem of the Incarnation (see Cross 2011, 453). How could one person be both God and human? For to be truly God, that person would have to be eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, immutable, impassible, and all the rest. But to be truly human, that person would have to be temporal, weak in some ways, ignorant of some facts, able to change, able to be affected, and so on. And nothing can be both eternal and temporal, omnipotent and weak, or . . . And so nothing can be both God and human. Thus, Christ is not both God and human, and so the doctrine of the Incarnation is false.

The Fundamental Philosophical Problem is the most important philosophical objection to the doctrine of the Incarnation. But to answer an objection to a doctrine properly, one must know what the doctrine says, which is why this objection comes at the end of this Element, after explaining the doctrine.⁴

1.4 The Shape of Things to Come

This Element is composed of eight sections. The Introduction, now concluding, discusses the methods I employ and offers some caveats. For instance, the method is analytic, with attention paid to the traditional formulations of the doctrine. The caveats include the claim that this Element does not assess biblical or historical evidence for or against the doctrine.

Section 2, on the person of Christ, addresses the definitions of the key terms, “hypostasis” and “person,” the names of the person (e.g., Logos, Son), and the divine status of the person. Section 3, on the divinity of Christ, discusses the divine nature and its attributes from two perspectives: the traditional view and the kenotic view. Section 4, on the humanity of Christ, considers human nature itself, whether it is concrete or abstract, whether it is composed of parts and if so how many, whether it has a will and a mind, whether it is a person in its own

⁴ This Element focuses on the metaphysics of the Incarnation. Those interested in the atoning work of the Incarnation should see Stump (2019) and, in this same Elements series, Craig (2018). For discussion of epistemic questions concerning the acceptance of doctrine, including the Incarnation, see McNabb (2018) from this same Elements series.

right, whether it is fallen or unfallen, and the weaknesses or infirmities it has. Section 5, on the hypostatic union, discusses whether the union can be fully analyzed philosophically, what features it has of itself (e.g., is it created?), and what we can say of the Communication of Idioms from the natures to the person, in light of the union. Section 6 focuses on the activities of Christ, including his will (Was it free? Could he sin?), his knowledge (Was he mistaken?), his death, and his descent into hell. Section 7 discusses the main philosophical objection, which is that anything divine must have certain predications true of it, but nothing human can have those predications true of it; thus, Christ couldn't be both divine and human, contrary to the orthodox doctrine. The last section is both more complex and longer than the previous sections, insofar as it takes up many of the extant responses to the problem, some of which are quite technical.

2 The Person

The traditional doctrine of the Trinity teaches both that there is only one God and that there are three divine persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Only one of these three persons, the Son, became incarnate. This Element focuses exclusively on the Second Person of the Trinity, the one who, according to Scripture and council, became human.

The focus on this person should begin at the outset with a discussion concerning the term “person.” Once the traditional meaning of that term is clarified, I discuss the terms used to name that person, as confusion on those terms can spell havoc for our conceptual clarity in these discussions.

2.1 The Definitions of the Terms “Hypostasis” and “Person”

Jesus Christ is referred to as both a person and a hypostasis in the conciliar texts. To give just one example, as Cyril says in his third letter to Nestorius, accepted at the Council of Ephesus,

Why should he who submitted himself to voluntary self-emptying for our sake, reject expressions that are suitable for such self-emptying? All the expressions, therefore, that occur in the gospels are to be referred to one person, the one enfleshed hypostasis of the Word. For there is one Lord Jesus Christ, according to the scriptures. (Tanner 1990, 56)

What, though, is meant by these terms, “hypostasis” and “person,” such that Christ counts as exactly one hypostasis and exactly one person?

Elsewhere (Pawl 2016d, 32), I have followed the work of Marilyn McCord Adams (2005, 37) and Alfred Freddoso (1986, 49) in analyzing the term “hypostasis” (in the Latin translation, “supposit”), following the Medievals, to mean:

Supposit (Hypostasis)	X is a supposit (hypostasis) if and only if x is a complete being, incommunicable by identity, not apt to inhere in anything, and not sustained by anything.
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The first clause of the right side of the biconditional is intended to preclude parts of suppositis from being suppositis themselves – my hand is not itself a supposit, to use Aquinas’s example (*ST* III q.16 a.12 ad.2).⁵ Wholes, not parts of wholes, are suppositis. The second clause is included for technical Trinitarian reasons. In brief, the question arose whether the divine nature itself is a hypostasis, in addition to the three divine persons. The answer had to be “no” for traditional Christianity, since there are only three, not four, persons. This second clause is meant to safeguard that “no” answer. To be communicable by identity is for the very same thing to be both had by one thing and given to another without the former ceasing to have it. Things that are communicable in such a manner aren’t themselves suppositis. The third clause is meant to preclude anything accidental from counting as a hypostasis. This was a worry, since some views of the Eucharist claim that accidental forms could exist without inhering in substances.⁶ Such non-inhering accidents are not suppositis in their own right. The fourth is most relevant to our purposes. The Medievals intended the notion of being “sustained” here to preclude the human nature of Christ, which is sustained *by* the person, from itself counting as a hypostasis.⁷ That human nature exists *in* the Word, depending on the Word for its existence. Things that depend upon others in the way that the human nature depends upon the person are not suppositis in their own right.⁸ One can find similar understandings of hypostasis throughout the Christian tradition.⁹

With this notion of hypostasis in hand, forming a notion of personhood is an easy matter. A person, on the traditional understanding of the term, is a hypostasis that has a rational nature.¹⁰ All suppositis have some nature or other. Dogs have their own natures, slugs have their own, humans have their

⁵ This citation ought to be read: Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*, third part, question 16, article 12, response to objection 2.

⁶ For discussion of this point, see Pawl (2012).

⁷ See also de Aldama and Solano (2014, 42–53) on this point.

⁸ It is true that, in another sense, everything created is sustained in existence by God on the traditional Christian view. That is a different sense of the term “sustained.” The Medievals were not saying that nothing created is a supposit.

⁹ See, for instance, Carlson (2012, 129, 259), Geddes (1911), Gorman (2000b; 2017, chap. 1), John of Damascus (1958, 20, 56), Pohle (1911, 222), Rebenich (2002, 73), Salano and de Aldama (2014, 42–43), and Tanner (2001, 32).

¹⁰ To see other discussions of this traditional conception of “person”, see Adams (2005, 23–24), Aquinas (2012, 13), Carlson (2012, 204), Cupitt (1977, 135), Ferrier (1962, 81), Flint (2012, 189), Geddes (1911), Gorman (2011, 430), Lonergan (2016, 387–389), Pawl (2016d, 32–33; 2019b, 22), Pohle (1911, 224), Sturch (1991, 269–274), Turcescu (2005), Twombly (2015, 57–60), Wesche (1997, 95, 126), and C.J.F. Williams (1968, 517).

own, etc. But only some of those natures are rational. And so only some supposita count as persons.

Interestingly and importantly, the notion of person used in these discussions is not a modern notion of personhood, called by some in the debate a Lockean notion of personhood (Cf. Pohle 1911, 226). Such a notion has it that personhood is, as Carlson (2012, 204) defines it, “An individual who manifests the developed traits and abilities associated with human, personal life (e.g. self-awareness, deliberate choice and action).” The reason this modern definition will be insufficient for the Christological (and Trinitarian) contexts becomes more explicit in the discussion of the humanity of Christ in Section 4. In brief, though, the traditional view is that Christ had a human element – a body/soul composite – that some argue fulfilled the conditions for being a person *in this modern sense of the term*. This may lead some to believe that there are two persons – “persons” in the sense relevant to the doctrine – in the Incarnation, something the conciliar texts and traditional Christian orthodoxy adamantly deny. This is just one example of how ignorance of the historical meaning of the technical terms can cause confusion concerning the traditional doctrine. In Section 2.3, we see another instance of confusion over terms.

2.2 One Person of the Trinity

Jesus Christ is a person – a hypostasis of a rational nature. Not only that, he is one person of the Blessed Trinity on the orthodox Christian view. Third Constantinople says as much, claiming that the council, along with the previous five councils, “professes our lord Jesus Christ our true God, one of the holy Trinity” (Tanner 1990, 127). This person did not come into existence within the Virgin Mary (a view Cyril calls “absurd and stupid” in the conciliar texts [Tanner 1990, 42]). Rather, this person “existed before every age and is coeternal with the Father” (Tanner 1990, 42). Since he is a member of the Trinity, coeternal with the Father, he is a divine person.

Is Jesus a human person, as well as a divine person? This question has typically been answered in the negative throughout Christian history, for complicated reasons. Such an answer has caused confusion in some thinkers. For it seems that one rightly counts as a human person if one is both human and a person. Christ fulfills both criteria. Christ “became human” according to the Nicene Creed. Moreover, as we’ve seen, he is a person. Why, then, this denial of Christ’s being a human person? We can see the hesitancy here by looking at the history of the term “human person” in the Christological discourse, combined with a traditional prudential maxim from those debates.

Concerning the history, the term “human person” was used to mean *merely* human person. As such, speaking in this way was viewed as problematic by orthodox proponents of the Incarnation. Philosophers will rightly note that “human person” doesn’t logically entail “merely human person” by itself. But philosophers will do well to remember that, in matters of preaching and teaching, *conversational* implicature is at least as important as logical implicature.

Concerning the traditional prudential maxim from Christological debates, the idea was not to speak as the opponents spoke, for fear of leading astray the laity. Aquinas, for instance, notes that while it is true that Christ is impassible in his divine nature, one ought not to say so unqualifiedly, as it may appear to be a word in favor of the view of the Manicheans, who thought that Christ had no real body (*ST* III q.16 a.8 ad.2). The same prudential maxim would lead the orthodox proponents of the Incarnation not to speak in ways that appear to support the view of the Arians, who thought Christ was not a divine person in the same sense the Father is. To make explicit that they were affirming neither a Manichean nor an Arian view of Christ, some thinkers in the tradition took to calling Christ a “Theandric” person. The English word “theandric” comes from two Greek roots, which in the nominative are *theos*, for God, and *anēr*, for man (which is *andros* in the genitive case).¹¹

2.3 The Names of the Person

Many terms are used in the Christological writings: “Jesus,” “the Christ,” “the Word,” “the Son,” “the Logos,” “the Second Person of the Trinity,” etc. There is some disagreement about what exactly is referred to with each term. We can see this most clearly if we focus on the name “Jesus Christ.”

Some people use “Jesus Christ” to refer to the assumed human nature alone (cf. Holland 2012, 81; Marmodoro and Hill 2011, 13; and Sturch 1991, 122, 141).¹² Others use “Jesus Christ” to refer to the person of the Son, the very person that exists eternally with the Father and Holy Spirit, and who assumes human flesh from Mary (cf. Alfeyev 2012, 265; Pawl 2016d, 46–47; Jedwab 2011, 169; Rea 2011, 150; and Wesche 1997, 12–13). Finally, some use that name to refer to a third thing, not the assumed human nature alone, and not the person of the Son or the Word. Rather, they use the name “Jesus Christ” to refer to a compound – in some sense of compound – of that person and the human nature into a “larger” entity.¹³ The view here is that “Jesus Christ” names

¹¹ I thank Jonathan Rutledge for discussion of the Greek roots here.

¹² In doing so, they are understanding the nature in the concrete sense discussed later in Section 4.1.2.

¹³ See Crisp (2011; 2016, chap. 6), Leftow (2011, 321), and Turner (2019, n. 5).

a contingent entity, not itself a person, but that has a person as a part (see section 5.3 for more on this view, there called “Model A”).

In this Element, I use the terms “Jesus Christ,” “Word,” “Second Person,” “the Son,” and all the rest as co-referring personal terms. They refer, in my usage, to one and the same person. I have argued for this usage of the terms elsewhere on conciliar grounds (Pawl 2016d, 46–47), grounds Flint (2011, 81n.17) shares. Against the first view, that “Jesus” names the human nature alone, we do well to recall that the councils call Jesus “true God” and “one of the Holy Trinity” (Tanner 1990, 127). No human nature, though, is one of the Holy Trinity or truly God. Against both the first and third views, the councils call Jesus a hypostasis and a person, as we saw in Section 2.2. The Word too, though, is a person. If we look back to the truth conditions for being a hypostasis in Section 2.1, we see that no hypostasis can have a distinct hypostasis as a component, since each hypostasis is a complete being in its own right. And so the Word and Jesus cannot be related to one another as component to whole, since they are both referred to by “person” and “hypostasis.” There must be two distinct persons, then, or the names must refer to the very same thing. If distinct persons, we have a nonorthodox view sometimes labeled “Nestorianism.” If the terms co-refer, then the naming convention I use in this Element is the correct one.¹⁴

It is true that the name “Jesus Christ” is bound up with the Incarnation, such that had the Word not become incarnate, he wouldn’t have had that name. Presumably, “the Second Person” is not contingent upon the Incarnation in the same sense. Even so, that doesn’t show that the two terms do not co-refer.

2.4 Conclusion

In summary, the Word, the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, is a person – a hypostasis of a rational nature. That very person became human and is the one and only divine person to have become incarnate.¹⁵ As I use the term in this Element, “Jesus Christ” is the name of a person, and that person is the very same person as the Word.

¹⁴ See Section 5.3 for more discussion of the relation between Jesus and the Word.

¹⁵ It is an interesting question whether the other two divine persons *could* have become incarnate. For more on that question, see Adams (1985; 2005; 2006, 198–199; 2009, 241;), de Aldama and Solano (2014, 63), Aquinas (*ST* III q.3), Arendzen (1941, 161), Baker (2013, 47), Bonting (2003), Brazier (2013), Craig (2006, 63), Crisp (2008; 2009, chap. 8), Cross (2005, 230–232), Cuff (2015, 366–371), Davies (2003), Fisher and Fergusson (2006), Flint (2001, 312; 2012, 192–198), Freddoso (1983; 1986), George (2001), Gondreau (2018, 145–150), Gorman (2016), Hebblethwaite (2001; 2008, 74), Jaeger (2017), Kereszty (2002, 382), Kevern (2002), Le Poidevin (2009a, 183; 2011), Mascall (1965, 40–41), Morris (1987, 183), O’Collins (2002, 19–23), Pawl (2016a; 2016c; 2019b, chaps. 2 and 3), Pohle (1913, 136), Schmaus (1971, 241–242), Sturch (1991, 43, 194–200), and Ward (1998, 162).

3 The Divinity of Christ

The previous section discussed the person of Christ. This section is the first of two that take up the question of *what* Christ is: fully God and fully human. This section focuses on his divinity, whereas the next section focuses on his humanity.

3.1 The Divine Nature Itself

According to traditional Christian teaching, there is only one divine nature, also referred to as the divine substance or the divine essence (Tanner 1990, 114). That one divine nature is possessed (in some sense) by the three divine persons. The claim that there is only one divine nature is intended to protect against tritheism; the distinction between the three persons is intended to protect against modalism (the view that the Father, Son, and Spirit are merely different ways that the one divine person chooses to manifest himself to the world).¹⁶

3.2 The Attributes of the Divine Nature

Scholars have presented various views concerning the attributes of the divine nature. This section canvasses the main views in the contemporary debate.

3.2.1 *The Classical View*

On one understanding, the divine nature has the attributes of classical theism. On this theory, the nature is impassible and so unable to be causally affected. The nature is immutable and so unable to change. It is atemporal and so outside of time. And it is simple so without any ontological complexity.

Parts of this view receive support from the conciliar texts.¹⁷ For instance, concerning immutability, the Council of Ephesus teaches that Christ “is unchangeable and immutable by nature” (Tanner 1990, 51). The same council teaches that “those are quite mad who suppose that ‘a shadow of change’ is conceivable in connexion with the divine nature of the Word” (Tanner 1990, 72). Concerning impassibility, Chalcedon says that it is an error to claim that “the divine nature of the Only-begotten is passible” (Tanner 1990, 84). Moreover, Chalcedon “expels from the assembly of the priests those who dare to say that the divinity of the Only-begotten is passible” (85–86).

Evidence for atemporality in the councils is less clear. Leo writes in his *Tome to Flavian*, part of the accepted documents from Chalcedon, that “whilst

¹⁶ See Hasker (2019) for a recent discussion of the divine nature.

¹⁷ To see the conciliar evidence in much greater detail, as well as evidence from later Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant sources, see Pawl (2016d, chaps. 8, Section II).