

Son of Man — Son of God

Ancient church traditions never came into being by sheer chance or mere convenience. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Church Fathers brought all the Old and New Testament symbology to life in the holy rites, and feasts that they established. The extreme attention to minute detail that was paid to the time and manner in which each feast was celebrated resulted in a rich tapestry of events and rituals which, if meditated upon, display a majestically beautiful representation of the gospel as it is lived by Orthodox believers in the church's annual liturgical cycle. In this article Fr Matta explores the meaning behind the ancient custom of making a joint celebration of what are now considered two separate feasts, namely Christmas and Epiphany.

ACCORDING TO ANCIENT TRADITION, it used to be that the Church celebrated the birth and baptism of Christ together as one feast. In those times this combined feast was called *Epiphania*, or “Divine Appearance.” Evidence of this is found in St Athanasius of Alexandria’s record of ecclesiastical feasts in which he mentions *Epiphania* without referring specifically to either Christ’s birth or his baptism.

The separation of Christmas from Epiphany began in the West, but only after the time of St Athanasius. However, for the purposes of our present spiritual inquiry we will confine ourselves to the investigation of the mystical significance behind this ancient tradition of binding together into one feast the celebrations of Christ’s birth and his baptism, which from a theological point of view indicates two births: Christ’s birth in eternity as “Son of God,” and his temporal birth into humanity as the incarnate “Son of man.”

It should be noted here that it was not an unintentional or chance happening that in the ancient church tradition these two feasts were celebrated jointly as one. The church was offering Christ to the world according to its faith in an integrated Christ, the *incarnate* Son of God, or in other words the Son of God and Son of man at one and the same time. As expressed by the early church this feast was in celebration of the divine appearance in its totality, which is summed up in the Greek word *Epiphania*.

In each of the four Gospels the revelation of Christ and his appearance in the world is presented to us. The manner of presentation is arranged into two parts:

(1) The Gospels of Matthew and Luke first present Christ born in Bethlehem. That is to say he is first presented as “Son of man,” the divine event being supported by earlier prophecies that pointed towards his incarnation: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and

bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Is 7:14); “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called ‘Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace’ ” (Is 9:6). These two Gospels verify the prophecies with the angel’s declaration of the Good News of Christ’s birth: “For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior” (Lk 2:11). It is here that the revelation of Jesus Christ begins, but only according to the flesh.

(2) In the Gospels of Mark and John the story of the nativity is bypassed completely and Christ is for the first time directly presented as the eternal Son of God. In the Gospel of St Mark, Christ is revealed on the day of his baptism rather than on the day of his birth. St Mark begins with the testimony of God the Father: “And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, “Thou art my Beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased” (Mk 1:10-11). The account in this Gospel unveils Christ’s divine identity hidden behind his human form; this outer appearance and human form were transcended altogether.

In his Gospel, St John the apostle goes even further and reveals to us Christ’s identity prior to the incarnation. That is to say he declares Christ in his eternal and essential relationship with the Father: In the very first verse of the first chapter of the Gospel we read “In the beginning” which means “the Absolute.” Here the apostle reveals to us divinity in its conceptual nature, “the Word of God,” the Logos who “was with God, and was God.” A bit later he presents Christ in this same essential and eternal relationship, but after the incarnation. In this way he reveals him in his unique sonship to God: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (Jn 1:14). Thus it is that St John verifies the revelation of Christ’s eternal sonship to the Father through the incarnation.

In summary it can be said that St Mark and St John both have revealed Christ in his eternal sonship to God. St Matthew and St Luke on the other hand, began their revelation of Christ with his birth in Bethlehem, presenting him in his sonship to man. Thus it is that church tradition has come to include both revelations together into one feast—the birth and the baptism of Christ—thereby expressing the oneness of the two sonships in the person of Christ, the Son of God and the Son of man together, the eternal Logos born in Bethlehem. To put it in another way, it was an appearance in the flesh, and then a revelation in the Spirit: one united *Epiphania*.

It was in baptism that Christ was revealed to John the Baptist, then to Israel, and then to the whole world. John the Baptist testified, “I myself did not know him: but... that he might be revealed [i.e., the meaning of *Epiphania*] to Israel... he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is

the Son of God” (Jn 1:31-34). It can thus be seen that through baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit, the eternal sonship of Christ to God was first revealed by means of a supernatural testimony. This testimony has shed its powerful light on the Nativity in Bethlehem, revealing that Christ’s primordial identity lay hidden within the miraculous virgin birth.

Within Angel Gabriel’s annunciation to the Virgin Mary it is possible to find a clarification of the concept of the two revelations under discussion, namely Christ as Son of God and as Son of man. The angel Gabriel said, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God” (Lk 1:35).

Christ himself used both revelations to declare his identity to the world. With regard to the reality of his incarnation and the full extent of his relationship with human beings, he applied to himself the term Son of man. Only afterwards did he use the term Son of God to show the extent of his relationship to God and the fact of his godhead. This theme runs throughout the four Gospels.

Christ: Son of Man

When Christ declared himself as the Son of man, he was evidently alluding to the prophecy of Daniel which says, “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom is one that shall not be destroyed” (Dan 7 :13-14). By referring to this, Christ wanted to draw the world’s attention to the inauguration of the Kingdom of God in his own person.

Christ has made a beautiful linkage between the name he chose for himself out of this prophecy (the Son of man) and his call at the outset of his preaching: “From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ ” (Mt 4:17). It is as though he were implying that the prophecy of Daniel is being fulfilled here and now before the very eyes of his listeners—as though he were saying that the Son of man and the Kingdom of God are here.

Daniel stresses the fact that the revelation of the coming of the Son of man would be associated with the clouds of heaven, and this is verified in the story of Christ’s birth where the visible descending and ascending of angels praising God were witnessed, and in the story of his baptism where the heavens were visibly rent open, the Holy Spirit descended, and the voice of the Father resounded declaring Christ’s sonship to God.

Within the appearance of the angels to the shepherds at the moment of Christ's birth, there is, however, a more profound and penetrating allusion than that in the prophecy of Daniel. Namely, in the Book of Genesis the appearance of the angels of the Nativity is most closely linked with the passage about Jacob's dream where we read, "And Jacob dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on him" [that is, on Jacob, and not on the ladder, according to the Hebrew version] (Gen 28:12, 13). In this dream, Jacob Israel was given the promise that the people of Israel would spring from his loins.

This prophecy was unsealed, and its code deciphered by Christ when he said in his dialogue with Nathaniel, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see [not in your own time] heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man" (Jn 1:51). Here, by referring to the rending of heaven and the ascending and descending of angels, Christ is alluding to the happenings at his birth, baptism, and transfiguration, and also to what would happen at his second coming. He is also unveiling his own identity existing in Jacob's dream; Christ is the "New Israel," no longer the head of one people, but of all mankind, for he calls himself the "Son of man."

At Christ's baptism the heavens were literally rent open: "He saw the heavens opened..." (Mk 1:10). This happening was simply an expression of the covenant of a newly unveiled relationship between God and mankind in the person of Christ. Isaiah had already anticipated this when he prophesied, "O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down" (Is 64:1).

As for the ascending and descending of angels upon Christ, this is an allusion to Christ's rank as Lord of Angels. St Paul spoke of this when he said, "When he brings the first born into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him'" (Heb 1:6). In another place we read, "And the angels ministered to him" (Mk 1:13).

When the angels are referred to, they are described as *ascending* and *descending*. This reveals the new relationship between angels and men in which the angels will always be with us attending to our needs, i.e. ascending with our supplications and petitions to God first, and then descending with the answer in hand: "And the angels of God ascending and descending..."

In the account of Jacob's dream, God promised Jacob that from his loins would spring the whole people of Israel, and the angels in the dream bore witness to the promised birth of this people; the ladder in the dream was a symbol of the Lord's divine condescension manifested in speaking to Jacob. In like manner the promise was fulfilled visibly and tangibly in the revelation at Bethlehem where the promise was fulfilled in

fact, not in a dream. Thus the angels appeared visibly and audibly, and it was fulfilled that God should descend from heaven, not to speak just a few words and then ascend again—no, he descended forever, in his own person and essence as the incarnate Word of God, alive and articulate, the Logos of divinity, to abide with us forever. God’s utterance is Christ; he is our “new covenant with God,” the Son of man in whom mankind has been born of God anew so that Christ might become the head of the new humanity forever, a humanity whose members are called saints of the Most High, saints from among all the sons of men, so that Christ might become “a light to the nations” (Is 42:6) and “the light of the world” (Jn 8:12, 9:5).

From God’s point of view, however, the title “Son of Man,” which Christ chose for himself, still bears for us depths of human experience that reach out into God himself. This experience cannot cease reaching out for even one day as it goes beyond the limits of this visible creation; and neither can it stop at the limits of our humanity, nor even at the edge of time’s end. Our human experience will never rest or settle in one place except in the ultimate mystery of Christ, which is to say God himself. Why? Because the true and original homeland of the “Son of man” is heaven: “Then what if you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before” (Jn 6:62); “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (Jn 12:32). Thus it is that humanity will reach out in the Spirit within its very depth in order, through Christ, to comprehend and arrive at its true homeland—or in other words, heaven.

It is in Christ that God, as “Son of Man,” has been able to descend comfortably and then ascend again while maintaining his absolute existence in heaven without obstruction. Thus he did in order to reveal himself in the simplest way, unveiling the profundity of his good will toward the sons of men. This was a carefully concealed secret, withheld from mankind’s sight and even hidden from the view of the holiest of prophets.

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To be continued