

The Word became Flesh: a Christmas Meditation

~Other Speakers A-F: Ron Bailey:

How can the creature search out the Creator??How shall the finite describe the Infinite??How can Man know God?

?The answer to these questions is more simple than might at first appear; God has chosen to reveal Himself. Mankind does not need to remain in ignorance of God. Finite creatures can know the unknowable. There are many things that man can know about God, because God has revealed them. If God had remained silent, man would have remained ignorant. God has revealed Himself in nature, although that is now a very imperfect revelation. God has revealed himself through the Holy Scriptures, although even that is a very incomplete revelation. God has fully revealed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ, whom the Scriptures describe as...

?“being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person.”

For centuries the ancient Hebrews had been taught that...

?“the LORD our God is One God.”?

To this unchangeable truth Jesus added another...

?“I and My Father are One.”?

The Holy Spirit speaking through the apostle John confirms this brighter shining of truth, when He teaches something which unaided man could never have discovered. Introducing Jesus Christ as the Word, who became flesh and lodged among us, He reveals...

?“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”?

The Word who was with God and was God, bore eloquent testimony to the deity of the Holy Spirit when He declared that those who defamed the Holy Spirit, were committing blasphemy. ??And yet none of this changes the first unchangeable truth; “the LORD our God is One God.” Neither do they explain the mystery. God is One God, but three distinguishable persons, each of whom is completely God. This unfathomable mystery, the theologians call Trinity; a mystery which can never be explained, but only illustrated. The creeds which came later from the councils of the early churches were not attempts to define God but rather attempts to exclude error.??The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are co-equal, co-substantial, co-eternal. The Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the World. The Son sent the Spirit to make that salvation a personal reality to men and women.??Man could know none of these things unless God had revealed them. Before this amazing self-revelation of the Eternal, Infinite, Triune God we can only wonder and worship.

in the beginning was the Word

The Gospel according to John begins with two amazing verses.

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. (Joh 1:1-2 KJV)

The link to the opening words of the Old Testament is intentional. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. (Gen 1:1 KJV) Genesis does not attempt to explain God but simply declares the fact of his creative work. When the first pages of our Bibles are opened God is already there. The Bible is God’s gift to man and its truths are for men’s benefit. There are many truths that are not in the Bible but here we have all we can ever need to know how God regards men and how we are to regard God.

In simple terms this opening sentence tells us that God is ‘older’ than the creation. The scriptures reveal later that God is eternal; without beginning or ending. The phrase ‘in the beginning’ introduces a time frame in which the remainder of man’s story is unfolded; here we find its beginning and in the book of the Revelation we find its culmination. But God began the beginning; when the beginning was begun God already ‘was’. The human mind can only work with events in a time frame. We may use words like ‘eternal’ but our mind is not designed to work with these concepts. God is before time and after time. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God. (Psa 90:2 KJV)

When John began his story he consciously opens at this same point; in the ‘time’ before time, before the beginning was begun. Those who knew Genesis might have expected him to start with the words in the beginning was God, but he doesn’t. In the first verse he reveals two distinguishable identities; the Word and

the one he calls God. He reveals the relationship between these two identities; their distinctive personhood and their unity in equality; theologians call this astonishing revelation – trinity. They have tried to express the inexpressible in careful sentences to exclude error but their statements are by no means the last word.

If we read ahead a little in John's account we read of an event in the history of one of these persons; And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (Joh 1:14 NASB) We shall return to this verse later but for now we can use it to further identify one of the persons we read of in the first sentences. The word became flesh i.e. human; a person who was not human became human. As the story unfolds it becomes quite clear that John is speaking about the person known to history as Jesus of Nazareth. Other recorders of events tell the story of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. He is known, to a certain degree, to history and his life was lived in a well known time-frame. He had a beginning, a middle and an end; or so it seemed at first.

But the Bible tells us that the beginning of Jesus of Nazareth was like no beginning before it. He was not 'fathered' but was virgin born. In fact, the natural birth of Jesus of Nazareth was the Word becoming flesh. No one would speak of an ordinary child, in reference to his birth, by saying 'he became human'. Someone could only 'become human' who was not 'human' before he 'became human'. Who was this then, whose conception was a 'point of entry' into the human race? It is to explain this amazing fact that John begins his account as he does. If he was not human before he was human 'who was he?' or 'what was he?'

What options do we have? Some religions believe in the possibility of re-incarnation but the Bible dismisses this possibility very plainly; '...it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment, (Heb 9:27 NASB) One religious group teach that an angel became human, but again the Bible dismisses the possibility And when he again bringeth in the firstborn into the world he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him. (Heb 1:6 ASV) (the word 'firstborn' is an honoured title not a biological description) This command to 'all the angels' would have resulted in Jesus of Nazareth worshipping himself. What other options do we have in identifying the one who became human? The possibilities have narrowed to only one possible 'suspect'; God became human. How could this be?

John uses a very simple word four times in his opening sentences. It is the verb 'was' meaning 'to exist'. But he uses it in the 'imperfect tense' which is the way we, and they, expressed continual past states. It is like opening a door into a room, seeing a seated person and then recounting your experience. "when I entered" you say "he was sitting in a chair". That 'was sitting' is your 'imperfect tense'. From the moment your story begins someone was 'already sitting'. When John opens his door upon the 'beginning' someone 'already was'; 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. (Joh 1:1-2 KJV). In the beginning, the Word (already) was, and the Word was (already) with God, and the Word was (already) God. The same was (already) in the beginning with God. It is mind-blowing, but it is God's revelation entrusted to John.

and the Word was with God

He then reveals that the Word was with God. Those old Greeks were very precise with their thinking and the use of their words. What does 'with God' mean here? The Greeks had a word which really meant 'together with' to be used in such circumstances as 'I worked with my brother'. They had another one which really meant 'by the side of' to be used in such circumstances as 'I stood with my brother'. They had yet another one which really means 'towards' or 'facing'. It not only put two people together it showed which way they were facing; this is the word used here; the Word was face to face with God. Used in this way it speaks of intimacy; there is movement in this word for 'with'. We are not to think of God and the Word 'side by side' but 'towards' each other in face to face fellowship.

This is a revelation that only rarely peeped around the curtain in the Old Testament. In the Proverbs there is a passage which speaks of Wisdom, but as you read the passage you realise it is speaking of a person rather than a concept. This is the great difference between Hebrew thought and Greek, but we don't have time to examine it now. Suddenly we hear Wisdom speaking; Jehovah possessed me from the beginning of His way, before His works of old. I was anointed from everlasting, from the beginning, before the earth ever was. (Pro 8:22-23 MKJV) We are evidently in the same atmosphere as Genesis 1 and John 1. Here someone who testifies that 'before the earth was', even in the very beginning He was already. Who was this who was 'anointed from the beginning'? That is to say He was already established from the very beginning to be the crown-prince. He is, using the phrase as a title and not a biological term, creation's firstborn one. (Col 1:15)

This amazing passage in Proverbs continues Then I was beside Him, as a master workman; And I was daily His delight, Rejoicing always before Him, (Pro 8:30 NASB) It was not only the Word who eternally 'faced' the Father but the Father eternally delighted in the one who was beside him. How long is an eternal day? This passage struggling to convey the wonders in ordinary language speaks of time before time, and of the time before days it says Wisdom was His daily delight. It is a wonderful picture of intimate fellowship between Father and Son through endless 'days' in a relationship that never grew jaded and in which there was perfect fulfilment. The delight was renewed 'daily'. This is not just a passive delight but the constant bubbling of joy; Rejoicing always before Him. Did you think heaven was filled with sober-faced angels? And all this in such a few words... the Word was with God. The next verse has a poignant addition; Rejoicing in the world, His earth, And having my delight in the sons of men. (Pro 8:31 NASB) Even before our race was created God delighted in the prospect. It is only picture but it is wonderful one. Before the beginning, or ever the earth was God loved mankind... you included.

Being eternal God knows the end from the beginning and mankind's future was no surprise to Him. He knew what would happen in Eden. He knew what would happen in Gethsemane and at Calvary. In all His delights there was the knowledge of what it would cost to retrieve the race from its rebellion. His 'delight' in the sons of men would necessitate the loss of His 'daily delight'. The most terrible moment in all history is His delight bore the sins of the world and was cut off. A psalm gives an insight into the real passion of Calvary; They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture. But be not thou far from me, O LORD: O my strength, haste thee to help me. Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog. Save me from the lion's mouth... (Psa 22:18-21 KJV)

and the Word was God

John's sentence continues and the Word was God. Some religious groups, following the simple order of the original words have retranslated this phrase as and a god was the Word, but the order of Greek words has special significance quite different to the English order. This part will become a little technical but follow it as you are able and be sure to read the last paragraph of this section.

In English the order of the words determines the meaning. e.g. 'the dog bit the boy' can only mean one thing. However in Biblical Greek the meaning is usually determined by the 'case endings' of the words. In the above example the ending of the word 'dog' would show that this was the subject of the sentence, and the ending of the word 'boy' would show that this was the object of the sentence. Consequently, in Biblical Greek the word order might be 'the boy bit the dog' but the case endings of the nouns would make it crystal clear that it was the dog that did the biting. The order of the words in Biblical Greek is not primarily to convey meaning but emphasis. So e.g. in our illustration if the full story was 'a boy and a girl were playing with a dog; the boy bit the dog'. If the case ending showed that 'the dog' was the subject then this would have the effect of saying "both were playing with the dog, but the dog bit the boy".??However in a sentence like 'god was the word' something else gives us the meaning. In these "equation" statements e.g. "the dog is an animal" the same case ending would be used for both; the nominative. This would make it impossible to know who bit whom, but the Greeks had a way around that too. The subject noun would be given the definite article 'the'. Now the word order of the sentence can be used to give the required emphasis but we can still identify the subject.??The Greek for John 1:1 is "and god was the word". This is an "equation sentence" so how can we know which is the subject? Easy, the subject has the definite article. So why not write "the word was God"? Simply because the writer wants to emphasize something else. It is a way of saying "what God was, the Word was". Everything that God was, the Word was. The lack of the definite article stops us from confusing the identify and person of 'the Word'(Jesus) with the identity and person of 'God' (the Father).??The word order tells us that the Word has all the divine attributes of the Father; the word order tells us that the 'the Word' is not 'the Father'. Martin Luther once wrote that the lack of the definite article disproves Sabellianism and the word order disproves Arianism.??Here's a little more Bible algebra. If it had said?"and the Word was the God" -> Sabellianism (Jesus-Only/Oneness)?"and the Word was a god" -> Arianism (and JWs etc)?"and god was the Word" -> orthodox trinitarian.

So to have used the Greek word order 'the word was the God' would have said something quite different. It would have said that there was no difference between the Word and God which is an error still taught by some religious groups. To say the Word was a god would have indicated that the Word was less a 'god' than God was. To say, as the Greek order does, says exactly what John wanted to say. There is no confusion of identities, no setting of one above another; and yet perfect union. And to eliminate any possible of an ordered

hierarchy we have the final statement. The same was in the beginning with God.

In these two sentences we have distinct identity, eternal fellowship, and perfect union. As the old creeds used to say One God in Three Persons – Trinity.

All things came into being through Him

Do you recall that the Proverbs spoke of someone who was ‘beside Him as a master craftsman’? We are now hearing the same thing in John’s account. Up until now all the only verb that has been used in the John’s sentences is the verb ‘to be’ or ‘to exist’, and the only tense he has used has been the ‘imperfect’. The continuous, in the past, tense. Now he switches verb and tense and we meet the words ‘were made’. This is the first event on John’s time line. The revelations of the first two sentences were not events but unchanging states.

Genesis simply says in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth but He did so through the agency of the Word and God said... and meanwhile everything came into being as the Spirit of God brooded upon the face of the waters. In fact, the creation is specifically attributed, in the scriptures, to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and without further explanation to the Triune God. John is very specific. It was the unique glory of the Word that brought all things into being. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. (Joh 1:3 NASB) This version is trying to hold onto the idea of becoming, and rightly so. Literally ‘all things became’ through Him. It is a contrast with the words used in the earlier sentences. The Word did not ‘become’ in those sentences; the Word was. That is eternal existence, but the creation has not existed eternally; at a point in time it ‘became’ and at another point in time it will cease to ‘be’.

and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being

The way that John seems to say the same things using different words almost seems pedantic, but John is putting clear space between the creation and the creator. It is vital to what will follow to understand that the Word is not a created being, but eternally co-existing with the Father. The gap between one created being and another can be very great. The gap between angels and men is very great, but the gap between Creator and creature is infinite.

All created things had a beginning and will have an end, of one kind or another. The Creator already ‘was’ right at the beginning.

Theologians sometimes speak of ‘creatio ex nihilo’ meaning creation out of nothing, but in strict terms the creation did not come out of nothing; it came out of God. He is the source of all that ever existed or ever will exist. Paul describes Christ in a wonderful passage in his letter to the Colossians saying He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. (Col 1:15-17 NASB) Four times in these few sentences Paul refers to ‘all things’; he wants to be sure you get the point. Christ is not part of the creation; He is its Creator. It is the same point John is making.

in Him was life

I don’t think John ever recovered from this discovery. His first letter is a bubbling stream of this realisation. That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) (1Jo 1:1-2 KJV)

From time to time we may meet someone who is a powerful expression of the grace of God. We might even say that they ‘have life’ or we may describe the inexhaustible energy of a child and say ‘he really has some life in him’. It is important to understand that this is not what John is saying here. He does not say that the Word had life ‘in Him’ but that ‘in Him’ was life. He did not have life; He was life. Life was in Him. Neither is John talking about a superabundance of energy or the sparkling of character. The Life that John had witnessed

and attempts to communicate in his letter is 'that eternal life'.

When we use the phrase 'eternal life' we are often thinking about its length. We think of Life which is 'everlasting'; that's just another English word for the same Greek original. But the essence of Eternal Life is not that it is greater in quantity but in quality. This is the life of eternity and the Word did not 'have it', but this life 'was' because it is in Him. The life does not sustain Him; He sustains the life.

This was not a passing glimpse that John records but Life which was thoroughly scrutinized; it was heard, seen, examined, handled. This was the genuine article. John knew that in touching Christ they had touched God. Can you hear the abiding excitement in his words...and we have seen it! I repeat, I don't think John ever recovered from this discovery.

and the Life was the Light of men

The Word reveals the thought, and the eternal Word reveals God; he that hath seen me hath seen the Father (John 14:9) This is John's reason for beginning his record in the way he does. He will move on shortly to the witness of John but he begins by introducing a greater witness. All that men have ever truly known about God has come through the Word. His unique role in revealed history is to be related to God with man in mind and to be related to man with God in mind.

Proverbs had described his 'delight in the sons of men'; literally the 'sons of Adam'. Do we have any idea how much God has loved the human race? It was so from before the beginning and has continued in spite of Adam's defection. This is the measure of that love that God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son... (Joh 3:16a KJV) The price He was willing to pay to reconcile the rebel.

John is still using those 'timeless' imperfect tenses. In Him was life, always. And the light was the light of men, always. Wherever there is a revelation of truth to men and women, in whatever culture or era, it has always been because of the Life being Light to men. So far, whenever John has spoken of Christ he uses the 'timeless' imperfect tense.

It is fascinating that Proverbs also describes Wisdom as a 'tree of life'. He always was the only source of life and light.

and the Light shines in the darkness

John now switches tenses from the 'imperfect' to the 'present'. John sometimes uses these present tenses in his vivid narratives. They give an immediate sense to the story, but they can also have other implications. John is not just thinking about the event of the incarnation, but of the continuing process right up to the present moment; the Light is still shining in the darkness.

John will move on shortly to speak of the witness of John Baptist, but at this stage he has in mind the continuing witness of the Light. John was a lamp; "He was the lamp that was burning and was shining and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But the testimony which I have is greater than the testimony of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish--the very works that I do--testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me. (Joh 5:35-36 NASB) The lamp was extinguished but the light shines on. There is nowhere so dark that the Light is not still shining there. In that very darkness the Light still shines.

and the darkness has not overcome it.

This is the way the ESV and a few other versions translates this verse. The KJV has 'the darkness comprehended it not'. The word can mean 'apprehend' but also in the way a criminal might be apprehended. The word was one used of a cat pinning down a mouse. The impression is that the 'darkness' attempted to hold down the light, but could not. This impression is carried through again in John's changing tenses. 'The Light is still shining in the darkness and the darkness did not extinguish it'.

Christ constantly spoke of His death as 'my hour' but at the moment of his arrest he said; When I was daily with you in the temple, ye stretched forth no hands against me: but this is your hour, and the power of darkness. (Luk 22:53 KJV) There was a moment in the history of the Light when darkness was given its opportunity to do its worst. Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour.

(Mat 27:45 KJV)

Although three hours passed this is, in truth, an 'eternal moment' followed later by resurrection.

Love's redeeming work is done, Alleluia!
Fought the fight, the battle won, Alleluia!
Lo! our Sun's eclipse is over, Alleluia!
Lo! He sets in blood no more, Alleluia!

. It always 'was'; we have discovered another of these 'imperfect tenses'. Christ was always to have been the source of man's knowledge of God. It is very specific, the way in which John uses 'timeless' expressions to describe the Word but 'event' expressions to describe everything else.

That was the true Light

Again, John has reverted to his long list of imperfect tenses. He was the true Light; always; He was the Light, the true. This is the first use of one of John's favourite words; true. It means more than factually accurate. Christ is the genuine Light, by implication, every other 'light' is not the 'genuine' article. Later John will speak of the True Bread, the True Vine, the True God. Religion has always been full of imitations but Christ's provenance is clear. He has God's hall-mark; '...for him hath God the Father sealed. (Joh 6:27 KJV)

which lighteth every man, coming into the world.

Again John switches the tenses. This is not saying that at the moment of everyman's entry into the world he is illuminated, but that every man is illuminated by the Light that is coming into the world. There is no man or woman who will not, in some measure, be illuminated by that Light which came into the world. The Light, who always was, is coming into the world. These are amazing statements which familiarity can easily rob us of. The Word, who is the unchanging God is 'moving', coming into the world. The Creator has constantly 'entered' His creation by the Light, just as the sun's rays have penetrated into our world, but John is moving towards his goal here. He is about to make a carefully prepared statement of breathtaking audacity; a statement that would be an offence to Greek and Hebrew philosophy alike, but he prepares his ground first...

He was in the world, and the world was made by Him.

The Word entered his creation. Emmanuel, God with us; God no longer 'afar off' but condescending to enter his own creation. The Pantheist believes that God has always been part of the creation but the biblical teaching of creation is that God created the world 'outside of Himself' although it is 'in Him'. There is an absolute difference between God and His creation, just as there is between a man and the thing he holds in his hand. God entered his creation but even at this point John has not made his ultimate statement.

And the Word was made flesh

Now we have the astonishing revelation. The Word who caused all things to come into being has not only entered our world, He has become part of it. John, by the Spirit, has studiously avoided using 'event' tenses for the Word. Each time he has spoken he has said, in one way or another, the Word was... always was. Now the eternal acquires a time line; the Word became flesh.

Imagine eternity. It is impossible of course, but we may get glimpses of it. Imagine a sheet of white paper that stretches endlessly in all directions; this is our symbol of eternity. Now imagine a short line drawn onto the paper; this is our symbol of time. Unlike the paper itself it has a beginning and an end. In comparison to the paper it is infinitesimal, but if we 'zoom' in we can see its dimensions. As human beings we are intensely conscious of this tiny mark on the endless paper, and we match our own experiences against its dimension but eternity is not part of time, although it can touch time at every point on the line simultaneously. God only is inherently eternal; '...the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen. (1Ti 6:15-16 KJV)

The eternal became temporal; eternity stepped into time. The Word became part of the time-line as a member of the human race. The poets have tried their best but the concept is beyond human comprehension, as Charles Wesley wrote;

God contracted to a span
Incomprehensibly made man

The Word came into being as flesh. He who had no beginning, began. Flesh here does not only mean the body but whole human-ness. This is not God pretending to be man, or God dressed as man, but God become man. He identified Himself totally with our race; he took our body, our mental capacity, our emotions, our hungers, our creatureliness. As all creation is continually dependent upon God so He too became dependent.

This was no gesture but an absolute necessity. God was about to make possible a 'so great a salvation' that would restore men and women to God's original purpose, but the agent and sustainer of that salvation had to be a genuine member of the human race. His life and death, resurrection and ascension, would result in a new priesthood but Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently. Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; (Heb 7:24-26 NASB)

Before this could be accomplished it would be necessary for an even more complete identification with the human race. Adam was created in childlike innocence, but his rebellion brought a terrible contagion into our race. At the very moment of Adam's disobedience that contagion swept through the whole race. This congenital condition has had its effect upon every descendent of Adam, with one single exception. Christ was born, not only innocent, but Holy. The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God... (Luk 1:35 NASB)

That Holy Life was lived out in public. John, and others, witnessed it in all its unique glory; '... and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (Joh 1:14 NASB)

And dwelt among us

It is at this point that John introduces another wonderful concept. Generations of Bible readers have grown up with these wonderful words, but John's original there hides a truth hidden from the English versions. There are several Greek words that John might have used to express the fact that the Word had made His home with the human race, but John's choice is rich with suggestion. He uses a word that means 'and he pitched his tent among us'. For many this phrase will awaken memories of the boy scouts or family camping holidays but for people like John it would awaken other memories.

When God brought His people out of Egypt He gathered them to Sinai and entered into a unique agreement with them, called a Covenant. Three times the people of Israel gave their enthusiastic assent to the conditions. Animals were sacrificed and blood was sprinkled to join the people to an altar and to God. Moses ascended the Mount once more to receive the Law written in stone. While in the Mount, God instructed Moses to take an offering from the people. It was to comprise an amazing assortment of materials; precious metals, precious stones, wood, fabrics, and perfumes. The project would take a whole year while they camped at the base of Sinai. It would require many unique skills and much special empowering to complete. And the project? Let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I am going to show you, as the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furniture, just so you shall construct it. (Exo 25:8-9 NASB) God was going to 'pitch His tent' among the tents of Israel.

This dwelling place of God was to be a tent. It would be, in effect, a mobile palace. God would reign upon a golden throne in the midst of his 'tribe'. The construction was much like a modern frame-tent to be set within a courtyard made of 6 foot linen screens. From the outside it would not look very spectacular; God's glory would be concealed from the casual viewer. From the inside, however, it would be bright with the glow of gold; God's glory would be revealed to those who had access to the inner quarters. This is not the place to go into greater detail, but God's tent was an amazing place.

Concerning this dwelling place, and in particular the Throne room, God promised Moses; And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy-seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel.

(Exo 25:22 ASV) In this tent where the glory of God was concealed and revealed, God would keep company with Moses. It would be the place of meeting and communion. It would be God's house; His own personal dwelling place, uniquely.

Perhaps we begin to see why John, always so prompt to underline the significance of things, says the incarnation was God tabernacling with men. Will God meet people just anywhere? In one sense, yes, but in another no. This, said the Father on one occasion, is my beloved Son, hear him. Jesus Christ is not one of many ways to God, nor one of many revelations. God will meet men here, but does not promise to meet them anywhere else. Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. (Joh 14:6 KJV) Not, we must notice, a way, a truth or a life, but the genuine article which is found nowhere else. This was symbolized in the Tabernacle of old; this was the only way to God.

God's word stands true. He will still meet us here, in the person of His Son, and will talk to us. Communications have been restored. In He who is both God and man, God has bridged the gap opened up by sin. If these words should be read by those who find this concept strange please let me encourage you to put it to the test. Come to Christ, just as you are, without any attempt to improve your image. Read John's story again and as Christ becomes real to you, talk to Him. And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name. (Joh 20:30-31 KJV)

But the Tabernacle does not end its symbolism just in the God-man as the place where men can approach God; there is more and of a darker mood. The Throne was inaccessible to ancient Israel except on one day of the year, and then only to their representative, the High Priest. This day they called the Day of Atonement and in Leviticus 16 God gave them precise details of how the operation was to be carried out. At other times access into the Throne room was punishable by instant death, but one this one day the High Priest could enter and survive.

First the High Priest had to undergo ceremonial cleansing and then two goats were to be taken to represent the people. The truths captured in this ceremony speak of the penalty of sin in death. One of the goats was sacrificed and its blood sprinkled on the Throne by the High Priest. God had promised to accept this sacrifice's death as a substitute for the death of the sinners whose tents surrounded His. This was no mere ceremonial; others had stepped into the Throne room and had died for it. If this sacrifice proved unacceptable to God the High Priest would never have survived the experience.

Next the second goat comes into our picture. In the symbolism of these things this is really one goat in two aspects; this is the goat who dies as the penal substitute and that carries away the sins of the people. This goat had been chosen to be the goat that escapes, or the scapegoat. We still use this language now although most who use it have no idea where it came from. The High Priest placed both hands on the head of the 'scape goat' and 'confessed' all the sins of Israel over the goat, and by this action... Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, even all their sins; and he shall put them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a man that is in readiness into the wilderness: (Lev 16:21 ASV) all the sins were transferred onto the goat that was then released into the wilderness. The original instructions continue; and the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a solitary land: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness. (Lev 16:22 ASV)

In this Tabernacle, where God would meet men, one would die in the place of others and one would carry away in his body the sins of the people. This would be the Word's ultimate identification with the race He had joined. Peter writes Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. [b] (1Pe 2:24 KJV)

This is ultimate purpose for which the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us now becomes crystal clear. For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: (1Pe 3:18 KJV)

Let earth and heaven combine, Angels and men agree, To praise in songs divine The incarnate Deity, Our God contracted to a span, Incomprehensibly made Man.
He laid His glory by, He wrapped Him in our clay; Unmarked by human eye, The latent Godhead lay; Infant of days He here became, And bore the mild Immanuel's Name.

The Word became Flesh: a Christmas Meditation

Unsearchable the love? That has the Saviour brought;? The grace is far above? Of men or angels?Â'
thought:? Suffice for us that God, we know,? Our God, is manifest below.
He deigns in flesh to appear,? Widest extremes to join;? To bring our vileness near,? And make us all
divine:? And we the life of God shall know,? For God is manifest below.
Made perfect first in love,? And sanctified by grace,? We shall from earth remove,? And see His glorious
face:? His love shall then be fully showed,? And man shall all be lost in God.