



## Christmas Before Jesus' Birth

All of us – I hope – are familiar with the true meaning of Christmas: the reason for the season, as they say.

Every year, on December 25<sup>th</sup>, millions of Christians gather to remember the birth of Jesus, who is God with us (Emmanuel).

For many, this baby is the savior of the world. The one who dies a horrible death on the cross, descends into hell, and rises from the dead. The one who paves the way for our resurrection from the dead by destroying our last true enemy: death.

The idea that God would become enfleshed so that he could die for our salvation may seem like a strange idea. It may even seem like an innovation compared to first-century Jewish worship in the Herodian Temple – the time of Jesus.

However, was it?

Margaret Barker (a member of the Ecumenical Patriarch's Symposium on Religion) makes an argument that Christianity preserves practices and theology from the Tabernacle and the first Temple, which was destroyed in 586 B.C. – practices and theology that didn't get preserved in the second Temple or in Herod's Temple.[1]

And one of these ancient ideas was the idea of an incarnate God – Christmas before the birth of Christ!

### The Tabernacle, Temple, and Veil

To understand how the Jews celebrated Christmas before Christmas, we have to go back to the time just after the Exodus, when Moses freed the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery.



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Everyone knows the story of Moses and the burning bush, the Hebrews crossing the Red Sea, and Moses



receiving the Ten Commandments. However, a part of this story also includes Moses receiving instructions from God about constructing the Tabernacle.

The Tabernacle was a large tent, the forerunner of first Temple, and it was in this structure that the Ark of the Covenant originally rested – specifically, within an area called the Holy of Holies. Here, the presence of God dwelled among the Israelites.

The Holy of Holies was separated from the rest of the Tabernacle by a large veil or curtain.

A description of it can be found in Exodus:

“And you shall make a veil of blue and purple and scarlet stuff and fine twined linen [white]; in skilled work shall it be made, with cherubim; and you shall hang it upon four pillars of acacia overlaid with gold, with hooks of gold, upon four bases of silver. And you shall hang the veil from the clasps, and bring the ark of the testimony in thither within the veil; and the veil shall separate for you the holy place from the most holy. (Exodus 26:31-33 RSV)

This veil is key.

## **The Veil Represents Created Matter**

The veil wasn't *just* a curtain that partitioned off the Holy of Holies – the place where the presence, or glory, of God dwelt – it had meaning.

Here is Josephus's (d. 100 A.D.) description of the veil:

In front of these [doors] was a curtain of some length, Babylonian tapestry embroidered with blue, white linen thread, scarlet and purple, a marvelous example of the craftsman's art. The mixture of materials had a clear mystic meaning, typifying all creation: it seemed that the scarlet symbolized fire, linen the earth, blue the air, and purple the sea. ... Worked into the tapestry was the whole vista of the heavens except for the signs of the Zodiac. (*The Jewish War* 5.212-13)[2]

The meaning of these colors is collaborated by Philo.

Why are the curtains (made) of woven linen and of hyacinth and of purple and of woven scarlet?

What is spoken about is the workmanship of the (materials) woven together, which are four in number and are symbols of the four elements, earth, water, air and fire, of which sublunary things are made, while the celestial sphere (is made) of special substance, of the very most excellent things which have been brought together. For (Scripture) indicates the earth by “linen,” for linen is earthly and from the earth; and water by “purple,” since water is the producer of this; and air by “hyacinth,” for the air is black and has no illumination in itself, wherefore it is illumined by another light; and fire by “scarlet,” for its colour is fiery. And so he thought it right that the divine temple of the Creator of all things should be woven of such and so many things as the world was made of,



(being) the universal temple which (existed) before the holy temple. (*Questions on Exodus 2.85*)[3]

Thus the veil that concealed the Glory of God represented matter.

### **The High Priest's Vestments also Represent Matter**

Now, I would be remiss if I didn't also point out that the high priest's vestments were also made out of the same fabrics.

And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty. ... "They shall receive gold, blue and purple and scarlet stuff, and fine twined linen. And they shall make the ephod of gold, of blue and purple and scarlet stuff, and of fine twined linen, skilfully worked. (Exodus 28:2, 5-6 RSV)

Not only was the high priest's vestments made out of the same material as the veil, but we also know that the vestments also represented matter.

For on his [the high priest's] long robe the whole world was depicted... (Wisdom of Solomon 18:24)

Joseph makes mention of this.

The high priest's tunic likewise signifies the earth, being of linen, and its blue the arch of heaven, while it recalls the lightnings by its pomegranates, the thunder by the sound of its bells. His upper garment, too, denotes universal nature, which it pleased God to make of four elements; being further interwoven with gold in token, I imagine, of the all-pervading sunlight. The *essen*, again, he set in the midst of this garment, after the manner of the earth, which occupies the midmost place; by the girdle wherewith he encompassed it be signified by the ocean, which held the whole in its embrace. Sun and moon are indicated by the two sardonyxes wherewith he pinned the high priest's robe. As for the twelve stones, whether one would prefer to read in them the months or the constellations of like number, which the Greek call the circle of the zodiac, he will not mistake the lawgiver's intention. Furthermore, the head-dress appears to me to symbolize heaven, being blue; else it would have borne upon it the name of God, blazoned upon the crown – a crown, moreover, of gold by reason of that sheen in which the Deity most delights. (*Antiquities 3.184*)[4]

As does Philo.

This is the arrangement of the sacred dress of the high priest, being a representation of the universe, a marvelous work to be beheld or to be contemplated. For it has an appearance thoroughly calculated to excite astonishment, such as no embroidered work conceived by man ever was for variety and costly magnificence; and it also attracts the intellect of philosophers to examine its different parts. For God intends that the high priest should in the first place have a visible



representation of the universe about him, in order that from the continual sight of it he may be reminded to make his own life worthy of the nature of the universe, and secondly, in order that the whole world may co-operate with him in the performance of his sacred rites. And it is exceedingly becoming that the man who is consecrated to the service of the Father of the world should also bring his son to the service of him who has begotten him. There is also a third symbol contained in this sacred dress, which it is important not to pass over in silence. For the priests of other deities are accustomed to offer up prayers and sacrifices solely for their own relations, and friends, and fellow citizens. But the high priest of the Jews offers them up not only on behalf of the whole race of mankind, but also on behalf of the different parts of nature, of the earth, of water, of air, and of fire; and pours forth his prayers and thanksgivings for them all, looking upon the world (as indeed it really is) as his country, for which, therefore, he is accustomed to implore and propitiate its governor by supplications and prayers, beseeching him to give a portion of his own merciful and humane nature to the things which he has created. (*Special Laws* 1.95-97)[5]

So, the high priest's role was associated with created matter. In fact, one could say that the high priest was vested in the stuff of creation.

## **The High Priest Represents an Incarnate God**

Moreover, when the high priest was vested, he wore the sacred name (YHWH) on his forehead (Exodus 28:36).

When fully vested, with the name upon his forehead, the high priest signifies the Lord himself!

And, like Christ, the high priest took sin upon himself.

It shall be upon Aaron's forehead, and Aaron shall take upon himself any guilt incurred in the holy offering which the people of Israel hallow as their holy gifts; it shall always be upon his forehead, that they may be accepted before the LORD. (Exodus 28:38 RSV)

So, the fact that the veil and the high priest's vestments were made out of the same material is key.

The vested high priest was the "Lord of Glory" veiled in matter. In other words, he represented the incarnate, enfleshed God – exactly what we celebrate at Christmas: a God who vests himself in matter and makes himself known through creation.

## **The Veil and Christ**

We also know that the writers of the Gospels linked the veil to the Incarnation of Christ.

When Jesus dies on the cross, the veil also "dies," ripped in two (Matthew 27:51 and Luke 23:45).

St. Paul, in his Letter to the Hebrews, also seems aware of this connection.



Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh...  
(Hebrews 10:19-20 RSV)

But this tradition lives on.

## **The Orthodox Church Preserves this Tradition**

On March 25<sup>th</sup>, the Orthodox celebrates the Annunciation, a celebration of the angel Gabriel coming to the Virgin Mary to announce that she will bear a son and call him Emmanuel (Luke 1:26-38).

Now, the Gospel of Luke doesn't say *where* Gabriel visited Mary nor does it say what Mary was doing when the angel appeared.

However, in Orthodox iconography, we see that the Virgin is in the Temple.

And what is she doing?

She's sewing a new veil for the Temple!

In other words, just as she learned that God would become Incarnate, she was working on the very Old Testament symbol of Incarnation!

Thus the link between the veil and an enfleshed God carries on within the Orthodox Church.

## **The Incarnation Before Christmas!**

So, did the Jews celebrate Christmas before the birth of Christ?

Well, it's true they didn't sing Christmas carols, but if by Christmas you mean: did the Jews celebrate God becoming Incarnate? Then, yes, they did!

After being freed from Egyptian slavery, God commanded the Israelites to build a Tabernacle, and later the first Temple.

Within this Temple was the Holy of Holies, which was where the glory of God descended upon the world and how God lived among his people.

The Holy of Holies was separated from the rest of the Temple by a veil, which represented all of created matter.

The high priest also wore vestments that were made from the same materials as the veil, thus the high priest, who represented God, became the Lord wrapped in created matter.



In all, it foreshadowed the Christmas story, a story of God wrapping himself in created matter to become human.

An Orthodox saint, Symeon the New Theologian, pulls it all together very well.

The priest coming out of the sanctuary and his descent into the nave signifies the descent of Christ from heaven and his humility. (*On Prayer* 41)[6]

And it's this humility that brings about our salvation!

Christ is born! Glorify Him!

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[1] *Temple Theology: An Introduction* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004).

[2] Translated by G.A. Williamson (New York: Penguin Books, 1970).

[3] Translated by Ralph Marcus (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1953).

[4] Translated by H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1961).

[5] Translated by Charles Duke Yonge, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/yonge/book27.html> (accessed, December 20, 2016).

[6] Translated by H.N.L. Simmons (Brookline, M.A.: 1984).