

Book Summary

Incarnation: Myth or Fact by Oscar Skarsaune

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Concordia Publishing House 1991

Howard Silverman, 2010 Hashivenu Forum

Many years ago, someone paid me a visit because they had some great advice for me about reaching our people with the good news of Yeshua. The advice was to drop the insistence on the deity of the Messiah. This would make Yeshua much more appealing to the Jewish community and increase our numbers many fold. The presupposition of my visitor was that the deity of Yeshua was not something Jewish and definitely not necessary if one claimed to be the Messiah. Conventional wisdom in the Jewish community is that Yeshua might have been a good man but Paul made him into a “god.” Others might say that Yeshua went from a Jewish Messiah in the gospels to the divine Christian Savior of the creeds. Oscar Skarsaune’s book *Incarnation; Myth or Fact* is an examination of how the Church developed its confession of the deity of the Messiah. The thesis of the book, according to the author is that “the building blocks in the doctrine of the incarnation are Jewish. Belief in the incarnation arose among Jews who considered it from Jewish presupposition.” (131) Skarsaune begins by dispelling the idea that the Incarnation of Yeshua is rooted in Greek mythology and consequently that the doctrine was readily acceptable in the Greek world. Skarsaune writes “it is not possible to explain the doctrine of the Incarnation by simply stating that such a belief was practically self evident in either a Jewish or Greek environment (23). By pointing to primary sources, Skarsaune shows that the idea of the Incarnation of God was just as scandalous to the Greeks as it was to the Jews. To the Greeks, it was not possible for a “god” to experience humanity and certainly it was not possible for a “god” to suffer. This created a dilemma for the early Gentile thinkers who were trying to articulate this belief in a Greek thinking world. Skarsaune uses Tertullian as an example of a Greek thinker who had difficulty explaining the Incarnation. For Tertullian, it was difficult to understand how the god of the Hebrew Scriptures could interact with human beings; eat meals with people; have

conversations. This flew in the face of his understanding of the nature of God that he found in the Bible and his understanding of Greek mythology. Skarsaune quotes Tertullian,

Surely these things could not have been believed, even about the Son of God, unless they had been given in the Scriptures; possibly also they could not have been believed of the Father, even if they had been given in the Scriptures! (Against Praxeas 16.13) (18)

Skarsaune argues that if the Incarnation resonated with Greek thinking, then Church fathers like Tertullian and others would have found it easy to accept. Skarsaune builds on this idea of the scandalous nature of the Incarnation and asks this question: If the Incarnation is offensive to both the Jews and Greeks, how did such a doctrine arise in a Jewish environment that differentiated so sharply between God and man? How is it that the earliest Jewish followers of the Messiah embraced this seemingly scandalous doctrine? Skarsaune observes that the Apostolic witness in the New Testament itself clearly testifies that Yeshua is the pre-existent co-creator. In other words this understanding is in the text and was not discerned later. He quotes such passages as Colossians 1:15-17 and Hebrews 1:2-3. These passages do not refer to Yeshua as the Son of David; king of Israel or other messianic titles. He is referred to as the creator and sustainer of the universe. Where is the connection with the role of Messiah?

Skarsaune identifies the personification of Wisdom in both the Bible and the Apocrypha as background for this description of Yeshua. It is precisely here that Skarsaune locates the Jewish presuppositions and background for the Christology of the New Testament as well as the basis for the Christology of the classic creeds. He quotes several passages in the Wisdom texts which describe “wisdom” as the pre-existent creator.

The Lord by his wisdom founded the earth (Prov. 3:19)

Notice the identification of Logos with Wisdom: *O God of my ancestors and the Lord of mercy who made all things by you word and by your wisdom have formed humankind. (Wisdom of Solomon 9:2)*

Notice the similarity with Hebrews 1:1-3 *for she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror in the working of God and an image of his goodness. (Wisdom of Solomon 7:26)*

Skarsaune explains that the description of Wisdom found in these texts is not the same as the Greek understanding of wisdom. The wisdom texts of the Bible and Apocrypha describe wisdom in uniquely Jewish terms. For example, Wisdom is identified with Torah in Sirach 24:23,

Whoever obeys me will not be put to shame, and those who work with me will not sin. All of this is the book of the covenant of the most high God, the law that Moses commanded us as an inheritance for the congregation of Jacob. (Sirach 24:22-23)

He goes on to say that Wisdom is included in Temple worship; in the high priest's atoning work; and that Wisdom comes to Zion. All are uniquely Jewish descriptions. He explains that the development of Wisdom included the idea of deliverance. The 10th chapter of the Wisdom of Solomon describes Wisdom delivering Israel from her enemies and delivering the first man from his transgressions! Notice in the following verse Wisdom is described as pre-existent co-creator and deliverer from transgression:

Wisdom protected the first-formed father of the world, when he alone had been created; she delivered him from his transgression. (Wisdom of Solomon 10:1)

Regarding the flood: *When the earth was flooded because of him, wisdom again saved it, steering the righteous man by a paltry piece of wood (10:4)*

Regarding the Exodus: *A holy people and blameless race wisdom delivered from a nation of oppressors. (10:15)*

Skarsaune makes the point from these texts that the Wisdom of the God of Israel was not only active when he created the world but was also active in the history of the Jewish people. In other words, Wisdom is the creator and Wisdom is the deliverer. Wisdom, according to Skarsaune becomes the common denominator for creation, salvation history and salvation itself." (37)

But why did the earliest followers of Yeshua identify *him – identify the Messiah* as the Incarnation of the Wisdom of God. Skarsaune looks to Yeshua himself in the Gospel record for evidence of this identification. He contends that the gospel accounts of the life of Yeshua point to one who “appears in roles and functions that burst all previously known categories in Judaism. He was a prophet but more than a prophet. He was a teacher but that with a power and authority completely unknown to the rabbis. He could set his authority alongside of, yes even over God’s authority in the Law. He could utter words with creative power. In a Jewish environment zealous for the law, only one category was ‘large enough’ to contain this description of Jesus: the category of wisdom.” (37) Skarsaune says, “according to my understanding, there can be no doubt that Jesus conducted himself in a manner that made it impossible to avoid identifying him with Wisdom.” Yeshua’s “I” was the Wisdom of God. “While such writings as Sirach, and Wisdom of Solomon identified Wisdom with Torah (which the rabbis would later emphasize) Yeshua speaks directly of himself; while the prophets exhorted the people to follow the Lord, Yeshua says “follow me.’ Yeshua says that greater wisdom than Solomon is here. He sums up his view “the sovereign authority with which Jesus conducted Himself toward the Law could not be understood and accepted in a Jewish society zealous for the Law unless it was recognized that Jesus belonged to the same theological category as the Law – or better yet that he was the one who rightfully belonged there and that the Law had to be understood through him, not the reverse. But then Jesus would have to be understood as the one who embodied God’s whole plan of salvation. In the same manner as the Wisdom and the Law had previously done, he had to unite creation and redemption, creation and regeneration in his own person. He who said of Himself what was usually reserved only for Wisdom or Law could not be understood as anything less than the Incarnation of Wisdom.” (37) Skarsaune says that it was no “Hellenistic myth but rather the encounter of the disciples with Jesus before, during and after the resurrection together with the background material which their Judaism gave them, that brought about the very early Christian confession of God’s Messiah who in the beginning was with God, and who took upon himself flesh and dwelt among us.” (43) The remainder of the book discusses *how* the Incarnation was articulated by the early Church Fathers and Apologists leading up to the Nicene Creed and the Council at

Chalcedon. Skarsaune notes that neither the biblical writers nor the early Fathers seemed to be concerned about the relationship of monotheism and an agent of creation. The idea of a pre-incarnate co-creator was not the issue. Judaism already was able to personalize the attributes of God; i.e. the word; spirit; wisdom; shechinah; memra. The problem was a crucified Incarnate Messiah. Among the early Church Fathers, Skarsaune summarizes some of the writings of Ignatius and the Letter of Barnabas. In both cases he finds that they write using echoes of statements pertaining to Wisdom found in the Bible and Apocrypha. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch in the early second century was fighting the Docetism of the Greeks. In defending the deity and humanity of the Messiah he writes, *...there is but one God who manifested himself through Jesus Christ his Son, who is his Word [logos] which proceeded from silence and in every respect pleased him who sent him.*(Letter to the Magnesians 8:2)

Skarsaune finds the background for this statement in Wisdom 18:14-15.

For while gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, thy all powerful Word [logos] leaped from heaven, from the royal throne.

By quoting these passages, Skarsaune says that Ignatius thinks in terms of creation categories when he speaks of the Incarnation of the Logos. Both Wisdom and Logos step out of the stillness from which God's creative activity arises. Ignatius' Logos Christology is clearly rooted in Wisdom.

In the Letter of Barnabas, also written in the second century, Skarsaune illustrates the usage of both creation categories and messianic prophecy:

The prophets prophesied concerning him. And he submitted as a human being to suffer for the very ones he had created...so that he might break the power of death and demonstrate the resurrection from the dead – thus it was necessary for him to be manifested in the flesh...so that he might fulfill the promise to the fathers.

Given the polemical nature of this letter, it is fascinating that the author appeals to the messianic promises in the Hebrew Scriptures.

In Ignatius and Barnabas we see early Christology; Ignatius emphasizes that the Logos of God becomes a human being who suffered and died as a real person. In the Letter of Barnabas we see the agent of creation who is the promised messiah allowing himself to be killed. In both instances Wisdom is the category used to describe the pre-existent son.

Next, Skarsaune turns to Justin Martyr. He spends ample time using Justin to illustrate Messianic Christology, which is the use of proof texts from the Hebrew Bible and Wisdom Christology. He compares Justin's *Apology* and the infamous *Dialogue with Trypho*. In his *Apology* Justin not only uses the standard bible passages featuring the suffering, death and resurrection of the Messiah but he also uses the standard rabbinic texts that describe the triumph of the Messiah. For example he quotes Isaiah 53, Psalm 22 and other texts about the suffering servant but he also quotes Gen. 49; Num. 24:17 and Psalm 2 which describe a triumphant king. Perhaps this was in response to the influence of Marcion who rejected any relationship between the God of the Jews and the Messiah. Skarsaune's point in discussing Messianic Christology is that the Fathers were not moving away from a Jewish understanding of the fulfillment of the coming of the Messiah. He writes, "Although it is possible to assume that the Church's Christology was moving away from its Jewish starting point, the source materials do not support such a hypothesis. Rather the opposite is true. The outlines of Justin's scriptural evidence for Jesus' messiahship are in a way more Jewish (i.e. more rabbinic) than we find in the New Testament – for example in the mission sermons found in the book of Acts." Skarsaune shows that Wisdom Christology is much more pronounced in his descriptions of the Messiah in his *Dialogue with Trypho*. For example,

...we know Him to be the first-begotten of God, and to be before all creatures; likewise to be the Son of the patriarchs, since He assumed flesh by the Virgin of their family, and submitted to become a man without comeliness, dishonoured, and subject to suffering. Hence, also, among His words He said when He was discoursing about His future

sufferings: ‘The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the Pharisees and Scribes, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.’¹

Skarsaune comments that this description of the Messiah holds creation and salvation together. He also observes something else. In the *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin places Yeshua in the passages where God appears to human beings in the Hebrew Scriptures to further identify Yeshua with the God of Israel.

But if you knew, Trypho,” continued I, “who He is that is called at one time the Angel of great counsel,⁴⁹² and a Man by Ezekiel, and like the Son of man by Daniel, and a Child by Isaiah, and Christ and God to be worshipped by David, (Dialogue Ch. 126)

Skarsaune is making the point that Yeshua “is a concrete reality in the whole of Old Testament history, not just a heralding Messiah. He is the active and speaking subject in the important events in the history of the people.” (66). In concluding the section on Justin, he writes “...we have seen how this Wisdom Christology could provide an author like Justin Martyr with important tools to meet the challenge of Greek philosophy. In the midst of this encounter we saw how Jewish was the mindset of an apparently entrenched Hellenistic theologian” (75).

Skarsaune moves from individual writings of the Fathers and Apologists and their explanation of the Incarnation to the controversies that engulfed the Church in the 4th and 5th centuries. These controversies dealt with how the Incarnation could be explained. While he compares the Christology of the Western Church and the Eastern Church Skarsaune focuses on the Eastern Church because of the emphasis on the wisdom categories of pre-existence and creation. He describes three schools of thought on the Incarnation: Antioch, Alexandria and Ephesus. The Antioch school represented the view that Yeshua was a fully human person who was indwelt with the Logos/Wisdom of God.

¹ Roberts, A., Donaldson, J., & Coxe, A. C. (1997). *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol.I : Translations of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325 (249)*. Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.

However, the Logos did not affect his physical being. In other words, he was a man indwelt with Logos. The Alexandrian School represented a variety of views that had as a common denominator that the Messiah had one nature and that one nature is a Logos nature and the Logos nature was one with the Father. Skarsaune describes yet a third way of understanding the Incarnation within the Eastern Church. He refers to it as the “Ephesus” Christology. Its uniqueness is in its unambiguous descriptions of Messiah as God. The point of this section of the book is for us to see the difficulties that the Church had in taking what originally was a Jewish category of understanding the deity of Messiah and trying to define this in a language and mindset that was foreign to Jewish thinking. This illustrates how unnatural the idea of Incarnation was for the Greek thinking world.

In discussing the Nicene Creed, Skarsaune writes that the Creed reaffirmed what the Church had held since its inception that the Father and the Son are eternal and that the Father and the Son are one. God and his Wisdom, the Father and the Son “were of the same stuff” as the water is the same as the fountain and the river, etc. Skarsaune describes it this way: “I contend that we have here a line of tradition that goes back in unbroken succession to the main wisdom Christological passages of the New Testament itself.” The Nicene Creed therefore was not introducing some kind of Hellenistic concept – it was guarding the earliest understanding of the deity and the relationship of the Father and the Son. Skarsaune writes, “It is a miracle that the evangelical account of the suffering savior was not offered on the altar of Greek logic, which demanded either that Jesus was not God because he suffered or that he had not suffered since he was God.” (110) In narrating the reason for the Council at Chalcedon we again see just how difficult the concept of incarnation was for these thinkers. The issue in the Chalcedon Creed is the two natures – human and divine of the Messiah. He details the controversy which again shows the difficulty in articulating this sublime truth of the deity of the Messiah.

In his conclusion, Skarsaune reminds the reader of the paradox with which he began the book: the doctrine of the Incarnation arose in a religious environment which for the most part would have thought to exclude such a possibility. The place to find the explanation is

with Yeshua himself. Behind the strange and unfamiliar language of the creeds is the understanding that the Yeshua's "I" is identical with the Wisdom or Logos of God.

Incarnation: Myth or Fact makes several important contributions. The dictionary defines *scandal* as an "offense" or "stumbling block" Skarsaune exposes, if you will, three scandals. The first is that Yeshua is the Suffering Servant; the Incarnation of God. There is no community for which the Incarnation is a natural thought. It is truth from above which is revealed in the person of Yeshua. It is a truth that no one finds easy to articulate and a truth that is a stumbling block for many. The second scandal is the fact that this hard to believe but true and wonderful doctrine finds its moorings in Jewish soil. The focus on Wisdom helps us to see that within the Jewish world of the late second temple period there was a body of literature which reflected an aspect of Jewish thought that set the stage for Yeshua. The literature clearly places Wisdom, as Richard Bauckham says within the unique identity of God. Therefore identifying Yeshua with the Wisdom of God clearly places Yeshua within the identity of God. The offense is that so many consider it to be a pagan belief. It is a shame that this literature which influenced the Jewish people in the First Century was jettisoned by the framers of Rabbinic Literature. The third scandal is that the proof of the Jewish essence of the Incarnation – the deity of the Messiah as articulated in Church history is witnessed in a body of Christian literature that has caused the Jewish people untold horrors – such as the Dialogue with Trypho and the Letter of Barnabas. How could it be that the very writings that give proof texts from the Hebrew bible and that use terminology representative of ancient Jewish texts have as their motivation to separate and isolate the Jewish people from the Messiah? This book and others like it certainly play an important role in setting the record straight.

Since the publication of *Incarnation myth or fact*, Oscar Skarsaune has published other significant books and articles. Two other significant books for our use are *In The Shadow Of The Temple* (2002) and *Jewish Believers in Jesus* (2007). Dr. Skarsaune is Professor of Church History at MF Norwegian School of Theology in Oslo Norway. He is also an Associate Scholar at the Caspari Center in Jerusalem. In May 2009, Oscar Skarsaune was the visiting scholar at the Visiting Scholar Symposium of the Messianic Studies Institute in Columbus Ohio.

