

February 15, 2015
Sunday of the Sheep and Goats

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings He Became

An adequate theological analysis of the Incarnation must devote some attention to the Greek verb *gignomai* normally translated as “to become.” Most often in biblical narratives this verb is used in an impersonal sense, *egeneto* (“it happened”), the equivalent of the Hebrew *ve-yahi*.

When it refers to the Incarnate Word, however, this verb often indicates a change of condition or state. In such cases *gignomai* may appear as either a finite aorist verb (*egeneto*, “became”) or as a participle (*genomenos*, “having become”). The most memorable example, I suppose, comes from John: *ho Logos sarxs egeneto*, “the Word *became* flesh,” which means that God’s eternal Son *began* a new existence as a human being.

This verse from John is not just one among many examples. It serves, rather, as the premise for every other instance where the verb *gignomai* is used with respect to the incarnate Word. His *becoming* flesh initiated a series of ongoing events in which he assumed human experiences into his own identity and made them channels of his transforming grace.

The idioms of Greek and English being very different, however, the translation of the verb *gignomai*, when it pertains to Christ our Lord, occasionally requires a measure of improvisation. How, for instance, should we translate Luke’s tight *genomenos en agonia*? If we render it literally as “becoming in agony,” this is very awkward English. It is difficult to translate this passage without *over*-translating it, so we are obliged to settle for something like “falling into an agony.” This version makes sense, but it also camouflages what I believe to be the subtle theological tone of *gignomai* when it is ascribed to the incarnate Word.

The opening of the Epistle to the Romans presents a particularly difficult instance of this phenomenon; it contains a primitive, pre-Pauline creedal affirmation about Christ our Lord. I quote the text in the New King James Version used in *The Orthodox Study Bible*, highlighting those expressions calling for analysis (and seriously requiring, in due course, a revised translation):

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God, Which he had promised before, by his prophets, in the holy scriptures, Concerning his Son, who *was made to him of the seed of David, according to the flesh, Who was predestinated the Son of God in power, according to the spirit of sanctification, by the resurrection* of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead . . .

I want to make two points on this passage:

First, the clumsy phrase, “who *was made* to him of the seed of David,” comes from the effort to translate the participle *genomenos*. We have here an affirmation of the Incarnation, in which God’s preexistent Son took on a new existence “according to the flesh.”

Galatians 4:4 contains a parallel statement about the Incarnation, in which Paul affirms that God “sent His Son, *genomenon* from a woman, *genomenon* under the Law.” Here, too, the sense of the text is that God’s preexistent Son, through his human and Jewish birth, took on a new mode of existence. He *became* what he was not before.

Likewise, Philippians 2:5-6, quoting an ancient Christian hymn, says of God’s Son that, with respect to his “being” (*hyparchon*), he was of divine form, and, with respect to his “becoming” (*genomenos*), he took on the likeness of a slave.

Second, the Romans text also affirms God’s Son, having assumed a new existence in the flesh, went on to be “appointed Son of God in power.”

Thus, this early “potted creed” (Archibald’s Hunter’s description), quoted in Romans, professes two doctrines about Christ: the Incarnation by which he entered this world and the Enthronement for which he left it.

Dr. Matthew Bates captures the sense of this creedal formula in a recent (and deliberately literal) translation, which speaks of the Gospel “concerning his Son, who as it pertains to the flesh came into existence by means of the seed of David; who as it pertains to the Spirit of Holiness was appointed Son-of-God-in-power by means of the resurrection from among the dead ones—Jesus Christ our Lord.”

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