CHAPTER II
HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE DOCTRINE OF INCARNATION IN CHRISTIANITY AND VAISHNAVISM

2.A. Origin and Development of the Concept of Incarnation in Christianity

2.A.1. Introduction.

Christianity is a way of life based on the teachings of Jesus Christ who was born in Palestine in approximately B.C. 4 and was crucified in A.D. 30. It is believed that he rose again from the dead on the third day. The Bible claims that he is the Saviour of the world and the fulfillment of the Old Testament (Luke. 24:25-27). He claimed that he came to fulfill the Jewish laws and not to destroy it. In fact he reformed the Jewish religion which is known as the new Israel, the Christian Church. The life works and the teachings of Jesus, together with the new life or Christian experience of his followers, made the Church develop the Doctrine of Incarnation at a later stage. However, we can find in the Old Testament a long preparation for the Christian Doctrine of Incarnation.


The preparation for the Doctrine of Incarnation is found right from the Book of Genesis in the Old Testa-
ment (Gen. 3:15). Here God pronounces judgment against the snake (satan) who induced Adam and Eve to commit sin, i.e., the seed of woman shall bruise its head. Genesis chapter 3 tells how sin entered into the lives of men. This is the story of the fall of man. Unlike Vaishnavism, Christianity gives more emphasis on the fallen nature of man and the need for a redeemer. Here satan is condemned to a state of war and irreconcilable enmity. A perpetual quarrel is here commenced between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the Devil among men. The war is declared between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent.

A gracious promise is here made of Christ as the deliverer of fallen man from the power of satan; though it was said to Adam and Eve only about a door of hope opened to them. When we examine closely this scripture passage (Genesis 3:15), it is clear that it is said about Christ. It refers to his incarnation—that he should be "The seed of the woman", the seed of that woman. Luke gives the genealogy of Christ in his gospel (Lk. Ch. 3) to show that Christ is the Son of Adam. Yet the emphasis is given to the seed of woman. 1 Tim. 2:15 states that she will be saved through her seed. This passage also refers to the sufferings of Christ as it is mentioned in Hebrews 2:14. According to Colossians 2:15, the seed of the woman should be raised up in the fullness of time and
he shall destroy the powers of satan and give a total overthrow to his kingdom and interest. It actually fulfilled partly and is only going to be fulfilled fully according to the following Bible verses—Luke 10:18, Revelation 20:10. This is the purpose for which God became man, that is to overthrow the power of satan forever and to give complete and everlasting joy and glory to the chosen people of God.

The story of Redemption through the incarnation of God was hinted at the Garden of Eden, (Gen. 3:15). Now God called Abraham to become the founder of a new nation for the purpose of redeeming mankind. The promise was given to Abraham that his descendants will become a great nation and through them all nations will be blessed. This was the promise of Christ, the Messiah through whom all the nations of the earth have been blessed.

This promise of a Saviour was renewed through the Mosaic covenant. Later on the Hebrew prophets predicted the coming of Messiah (the Hebrew word for Christ) and his earthly ministry to be the Saviour of the whole world.

It is interesting to note that the writings of the prophets like Isaiah, Micah, Zechariah and Malachi predict the incarnation of Christ. Isaiah chapter 7 speaks about a sign or miracle. Is. 7:14, "Behold a virgin shall
conceive and bear a son, and shall call him Immanuel (God with us). Here the virgin birth of Christ is predicted.

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."

(Isaiah 9:6)

This prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled in the life of Jesus according to Matthew 1:23. Is. 11:19 speaks about the Messiah and his kingdom. Is. 53 gives a picture of the suffering saviour, the crucifixion of Christ. There are many references in the writings of Zechariah, Malachi, and Micah giving Messianic prophecies - Zech. 3:8,9; 9:10; 11:12; Mal. 4; Micah 5:2-5.

Besides the writings of Messianic prophets, there are many Messianic passages in Psalms and Songs of Solomon, (Ps. 2, 22, 45, 72, 118, 132). The following are the passages in the Psalms which the New Testament explicitly declares that they refer to Christ, (Ps. 22:16; 69:4; 45:6; 22:8,1,18; 16:10; 41:9; 69:21; 110:1,4; 118:22,26).

New Testament also gives references to Old Testament events indicating that they are types of Christ. For example, Christ, the head of the new creation, was typified by Adam, (1 Cor. 15:22; 45-47). Christ was again typified by Isaac, the promised seed, (Gen. 15:3,4). Moses was also a type of Christ, being the deliverer of Israel,
Melchizedek was considered as the earlier manifestation of Christ, (Christophany), Gen. 24:18-20; Heb. 7:1-28. Christ was both the King and Priest like Melchizedek.

Many of the Old Testament events and festivals refer to Christ. The offering of Isaac was a picture of the death of Christ, (Gen. 17:16; Heb. 11:19). It was on Mt. Moriah, Abraham offered Isaac, the very same place where God's own Son was offered 2000 years later. God gave manna to Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years. Jesus regarded manna as a shadow of himself, (Jn. 6:31-58). The brazen serpent set up by Moses at the command of God was afterwards used by Jesus as symbolical of the uplifted Son of man, (Jn. 3:14). The Jewish festivals like Passover and Atonement were looking forward for the death of Christ for the redemption of Israel.

Even though the Old Testament predicted the coming of Messiah, men did not have any adequate comprehension of his person and work, until he actually came and lived among men. The Doctrine of Incarnation developed only during the early centuries, when there were a lot of controversies in the Christian Church. The question regarding the nature of Christ is a Christological problem which remains a never ending problem.


2.A.3.1. The Synoptic Christology. This is found in the Synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke. To Mark, Jesus is the Messiah (Mk. 1:1), the beloved Son of God, (Mk. 1:2). The main concern of this gospel is the life which unfolds the Messiahship of Jesus. The Centurian declares, "Truely this man was the Son of God." (Mk. 15:39). Matthew's gospel has more fully unfolded the doctrine of the Messiahship and placed it in its historical relations. He relates the coming of Messiah with the Old Testament prophecies. Luke declares Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the whole world. In him ancient promises and prophecies are fulfilled, (Lk. 1:33). Jesus then comes through Israel, but for mankind.

2.A.3.2. The Johannine Christology. This is found in the fourth gospel (Gospel of John) which relates the historical Christ to the eternal God through his notions of Word and Son. The Word is the creator and revealer while Son
is the Saviour according to him, (Jn. 1:3,4). God is love and the process by which this love is realized for man is the incarnation. The Word becomes flesh and dwells among us, (Jn. 1:14). A.M. Fairbairn states,

"The person who incarnates the eternal love or manifests the eternal life is the historical Christ ... Christ as the incarnate Word is the light of man as the incarnate Son is their life."

According to Fairbairn Johannine Christology is the most speculative. At the same time it is the most personal Christology in the New Testament. It is the Christology of the heart.

2.A.3.3. **The Pauline Christology.** This is different from the Christology of John. Christology of Paul is a Christology of the intellect. Though Jesus Christ is to him the supreme historical reality, he puts more emphasis on the idea and doctrine than on fact and history. It seems that Paul wants to show the distinction between Jesus and Christ. The name Christ was, at first, only an office which signified the Saviour, but only Jesus filled this office. The identification of the person Jesus with the office Christ meant that his character became the character of the official Christ.

Paul's Christology is a synthesis of theology and Anthropology because his conception of Christ stands originally connected with his conception of God on one
hand and of man on the other. Christ is God's Son, Divine in name and dignity, having the same form of God, yet he is connected with man, born of a woman (Rom. 8:3; Phil. 2:6; Gal. 4:4; Rom. 1:2). He is thus two-fold in origin and nature, because he is of God according to the Spirit (Rom. 1:3-5), and he is of man according to flesh (Rom. 9:5). In the Epistles to Colossians and Ephesians, Christ is mentioned not simply as an historical Jesus, but as a creator, (Col. 1:15, 16). He is the vital connection between God and world. As the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15) he stands in double relation. He is in relation to God whose image he is and at the same time related to man who sees God in him. In him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, (Col. 2:9, 1:19).

2. A. 3. 4. Christology of the Hebrews. The Book of Hebrews presents us with a quite specific interpretation of Christ. He is presented as the fulfillment of the Levitical sacrifices and order. He is the archetype of Levitical system in which he is latent. In this epistle to the Hebrews the writer has strongly emphasized the manhood of Christ. Jesus was a partaker of our common flesh and blood, (Heb. 2:14), made like unto his brothers in all things, (Heb. 2:17), was tempted as they are (Heb. 4:15, 2:18). As a Son, he suffered, learned obedience, attained perfection, tasted death (Heb. 4:15).
As Son Christ has a certain essential relation to the Father. This is expressed by metaphors such as, he is the image of God, is the effulgence of the glory, (Heb. 1:3). This means Son is the radiance or distributed light through which the inaccessible glory is revealed and known. He is also the visible image of the invisible God. This metaphor expresses the absolute inseparable relationship between Son and the Father.

The writer also expresses the identity of the Son with the Father, yet shows the difference. Though Father and Son are distinguished, each is O Theos (O God), Heb. 1:8. This Son is Jesus Christ who is exalted to the right hand of the majesty in the heaven (Heb. 8:21).

2. A. 3. 5. The Jacobian Christology. This is different from that of Paul as well as Hebrews. In this epistle the doctrine of incarnation is undeveloped. There is less emphasis on historical Jesus. There is also less emphasis on Fatherhood of God and the sacrifice of Christ. He was late in recognising the Lord, though he had lived face to face with him longer than any other disciple. He describes himself as servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, (Jas. 1:1). This same Jesus Christ is the Lord of Glory, (Jas. 2:1). The Christology of James is not rooted in the historical person of Jesus Christ.
2.A.3.6. The Petrine Christology. The Christology of Peter is different from that of Paul and James. It is more personal. It is the product of his own experience. He gives more emphasis on the reality of Christ's person, of his sinlessness, his sufferings, and the effect of his resurrection on the faith and hope of his believers. He also emphasised the pre-existence of Christ, (1 Pet. 1:11, 21; 2:24). Christ was foreknown indeed before the foundation of the world, but it was manifested at the end of the times, (1 Pet. 1:20).

2.A.3.7. The Apocalyptic Christology. The apocalyptic Christology is found in the Book of Revelation. Here Christ is conceived as the Son of God sitting on the right hand of God the Father. He is the absolute Lord exalted above all kings (Rev. 1:15; 7:17; 17:14). He is eternal, the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, (Rev. 1:8; 22:13).

Since the New Testament Christology discusses the two natures of Christ, the early Church had to face many difficult theological and philosophical problems. The reconciliation of their Doctrine of Trinity with monotheism was also a difficult problem for the early Church. The controversy of Trinity and the person of Christ was endless. The early Church accepted the deity of Jesus
as a historical fact without attempting to explain it. But the pressure of philosophy without and of heresy within forced the Church to attempt some formula of faith.

It would be interesting to note that the Apostles themselves were conscious of the fact that Christ must be far more than the historical Jesus of the gospels. By the end of the first century the Church realised that any adequate definition of the person of Christ could not be simple. During this period she had to struggle for a long time, especially the second, third, and fourth centuries because of the theoretical teachings of some of the Church fathers.


There were two main tendencies in the Christological struggle in the early Church. The first tendency was mainly rationalistic in nature. It denied the divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ. As a result, the reality of the incarnation was sacrificed. The second tendency, on the other hand, over emphasised the divinity of Jesus and considered Lord's humanity as appearance.

In this respect, the Church had to face the following important heresies. (a) Ebionism (A.D.107): The Ebionites denied the reality of the divine nature in Christ and held the view that he was merely a man.
(b) Docetism (A.D. 70-170): It was the denial of the humanity of Christ. To gnostics the life or death of Jesus Christ was only appearance or seeming. (c) Arianism (A.D. 325): Arianism was condemned at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. Arius denied the deity of Christ. (d) Appollianarianism (A.D. 381): Bishop Appollinarius denied the integrity of Christ's human nature. He denied to Christ a human soul. (e) Nestorianism (A.D. 430): Nestorianism denied the unique personality of Christ by separating the two natures into distinct persons. To Nestors the union is only moral rather than organic. Nestrians thus held the view that in Christ there were two separate persons—divine and human—united in a single individual. (f) Eutychianism (A.D. 451): On the other hand, Eutyches denied the integrity of Jesus Christ. They held the view that in him there were two natures mingled into one which constituted a third nature.

In opposition to all these errors or heresies, the Church promulgated the orthodox doctrine at the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451. This doctrine holds that in the one person, Jesus Christ, there are two natures, a human nature and a divine nature, each in its completeness and integrity, and that these two natures are organically and indisolubly united, so that no third nature is formed thereby. This doctrine held its ground and
2.A.5. Modern Christology.

The Christology of some of the modern theologians including the Indian Christian theologians must be discussed in brief here to show the development of the doctrine of incarnation in the modern period. During the Scholastic period the theologians were more concerned of the work of Christ rather than the nature of his person. But as a result of Renaissance and Reformation many theologians came forward and discussed thoroughly the Christological problems. They were:— (a) Luther: He attacked the dogmatic theology of the medieval Church. To him God in Christ is the sole and sufficient Saviour.

(b) Schelling: Schelling considered theology as the synthesis of philosophical and historical knowledge. To him God reveals his heart (love) through incarnation, and man sees it and surrenders freely his particular will to the Universal Will. God must become man in order that man may come to God again. Christ conceived not as an individual, but as universal, the ideal man, but a historical individual is necessary to make this truth known.

(c) Hegel: Hegel also looked at the problem of incarnation through his philosophy. To Hegel, Absolute and Godhead are different names, but agree in essence.

(d) Schleiermacher: Schleiermacher's theology was
essentially a Christology. Hegel approached Christ through faith of the Church and Schleiermacher through what he termed the Christian consciousness. Hegel came to the question from a speculative system in order to incorporate the religion with his philosophy; Schleiermacher, on the other hand, came to it from the existence and experience of religious persons and society. Faith was to Hegel something intellectual, objective experience. Christ, the archetypal person has thus become an ever operating, moral cause. His sinless nature could not have a natural source. It must, then, have had a supernatural source. His consciousness was ever full of God. God possessed him without measure and in him God had his being literally.


Side by side with the Western scholars certain Indian Christian theologians and also few Hindu theologians developed the Doctrine of Incarnation in the Indian context. Among them few names are worth mentioning. M.M. Thomas has stated in his forward to Indian Christian Theology of Robin Bood that it is foolish to under-rate the Indian Christian theology simply because it has not resulted in systems. With the exception of the ancient Church in Kerala, the Church in India is young in comparison with the Church in the west. Therefore Indian Christology is not yet developed as a dogmatic theology. Yet Indian
Christology is found in the writings of some Indian theologians, like Kesab Chandra Sen, Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya, Sunder Singh, A.J. Appasamy, P. Chenchiah, V. Chakharai. They all hold the view that the Christian faith is to be interpreted by the Indian Church in its own way. The aim of Indian Christology, according to Klaus Klostermaier (Vrindaban P. 108) as quoted by Robin Boyed is "to express in Hindu terms Christ as the living relationship of every body with the Ultimate." But first of all this living relationship with the Ultimate must be realised in experience, for India does not require new dogmas on the nature of Christ, but needs rather the Christ experience in depth, the experience of Reality.

2.A.6.1. Kesab Chandra Sen. Kesab Chandra Sen was a controversial figure in his own time. He could see a vision of Christ himself. Christ became the centre of his life and the guiding force in all his thinking, yet he steadfastly refused to allow that thinking to be forced into a western mould. He never acknowledged to be a Christian. Christ was the centre of his religious experience though he was a member of the Brahma Samaj, according to which God is the undifferentiated Absolute-Brahman. But to Sen Brahman is always SaI, Cit, Ananda, a Triune God, different from Ram Mohan Roy's 'Unitarianism'. He pictured Christ as the pre-existent Logos. This eternal Logos, this Cit-Christ was a man. But he described the nature
of Christ as divine-human.

2.A.6.2. Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya. Under the influence of Keshab Chandra Sen, Upadhayaya became warmly attached to the person of Christ. He became a Christian Sanyasi. He was strongly convinced that it is possible to be a Hindu and Christian at the same time. He felt the need to use Indian thought system in the place of Greeco-Scholastic method of thinking in formulating the Christian doctrine for the Indians, especially the Vedantic method. To Brahmabandhav Christ is the God-man and Logos. He expressed his Christology largely in Hindu terminology. To him Christ is the image of God (Brahman) and in him the eternal Word (Cit), the fullness of Godhead dwells. He is the true Nara-Hari (Man-God). Upadhyaya rejects the use of the word avatara for Christ. The Vaishnava tradition holds that God, Isvara, from time to time comes down to earth as an avatara to save man in his need. But to Upadhyaya, there is only one incarnation, that of Christ, for he is unique. In Christ God himself, Parabrahman, becomes incarnate while Krishna was only the avatara of Vishnu.

2.A.6.3. Sunder Singh. Sunder Singh's theology is based on his direct experience of Jesus Christ. To him Christ is full God, in him alone God is fully revealed.
2.A.6.4. **Bishop Appasamy.** He was very much influenced by the Bhakti tradition of Ramanuja. He seeks to associate the concept of God in the fourth gospel with the Vaishnava concept of immanent God (antryamin) especially based on John 1:10, "He was in the world." He interprets this expression as referring to the immanence of Christ, the Logos, in the world even before his incarnation. He writes about the immanence of Christ in his book 'What is Moksa':

"Because men have not understood Him, even though He is immanent in them, He has become flesh. The incarnation is a more effective means of showing God than mere immanence."  

Though Upadhyaya and Sen did not apply the term avatara to the incarnation of Christ, Appasamy used it in the sense that Jesus Christ is the full revelation of God as in the case of Vishnu incarnation in Krishna. But the Gita view of incarnation is different from the Christian view of the incarnate Christ who is the incarnation of the whole being of God, and in whom the fullness of God-head dwells bodily (Col. 2:9). Christ came not to destroy the wicked but to save and also for the Christians the incarnation of Christ is once and for all and unique.

2.A.6.5. **P. Chenchiah.** He felt that he was in a position to interpret the Christian faith in a way which would be
meaningful to the educated Hindus of the twentieth century. To him the central fact of the Christian faith is the direct experience of Christ. His own emphasis is firmly on the historicity and humanity of Christ. Not only that, he regarded the human element in Christ as something permanent. Here he opposes the Vaishnava doctrine of avatara who assumes a human form temporarily for a specific purpose. With regard to the relationship of the divine and human in Christ, Chenchiah opposed the classical Christological understanding of Christ as metaphysically one with the Father. To him Jesus is never the Absolute, but God as standing in relation to man. In this way he attacked Chalcedonian Christology which says that Jesus is fully God and fully man. Jesus is son of God in the sense that the spirit of God entered him. He is the Son of man because he was born of a woman. For Chenchiah, Christ is a new living entity, the God-man, the bridge between God and man - God is God, man is man. But the two met and fused in Jesus into one. He is the first fruits of the new creation. In this way Chenchiah is giving a new interpretation to the doctrine of incarnation different from the traditional Christology.

2.A.6.6. Chakkarai. Chakkarai is another Indian Christian theologian who gives a new interpretation to the Doctrine
of Incarnation. To him incarnation is progressive. It did not end with the earthly ministry of Jesus, it is still advancing. It is permanent unlike the Hindu avataras. To him the incarnation is dynamic and is still at work today through the influence of the Holy Spirit. Christ continues to be man working with the lives of his Believers.10

2.B. Origin and Development of the Concept of Incarnation in Vaishnavism


Vaishnavism is one of the theistic sects in Hinduism. It is known as the religion of grace as in the case of Christianity. The term Vaishnavism refers to the god Vishnu who is now worshipped more in his incarnations as Krishna or Rama which is different from the Vedic form of worship. Before we discuss the origin and development of the concept of incarnation in Vaishnavism let us look into the history of Vaishnavism in brief.

It is a fact that the early Vaishnavas were a combination of different religious sects. Probably the worship of Vishnu, Bhagavatism or the Vasudeva cult, was originally advocated by Vrsni people.

It is believed that Vaishnavism in South India was
developed by Alvars. They gave prominence to the emotional side of Vaishnavism. This cult flourished there, from the early years of the Christian era under the impetus given by the Alvars, who preached Bhakti, devotion to Krishna. They composed songs in Tamil. They used to adore idols of Vishnu in different forms. They worshipped all avatars of Vishnu, particularly Krishna. Alvars were not against Brahmanism, but were against Buddhists and Jains. It is evident that the South Indian form of Vaishnavism owed its origin to Northern Vaishnavism of Bhagavata sects. Their teachings and works were based on the Bhagavadgita and Bhagavata. It is believed that Sri Ramanuja, the real backbone of Vaishnavism, developed his philosophical works based on the teachings of Bhagavata cult. Dr. Radhakrishnan writes regarding the origin of the Vaishnava movement. According to him, it has a very long history, almost from the beginning of the Epic period. In Rg-Veda, Vishnu is mentioned as a Solar Deity. The religion in which Bhagavān (or Bhagavat) is the object of worship is Bhagavatism. Vaishnavism is the development of the Bhagavata religion, which identifies Vishnu with Bhagavān. Pancarātra religion mentioned in Mahabharata is same as Vaishnavism. Though Vishnu and Siva are rival deities in the Epics, Vishnu is mentioned as supreme deity in the Vishnu Purana.
It is true that Vaishnavism flourished in South India through the works of the Alvars and the Acaryas. The North Indian Vaishnavism received a fresh impetus from the South, especially from the teachings and propaganda of Ramanuja. While Ramanuja and Madhwa developed Vaishnavism in South India, Vallabha developed Vaishnavism in central India. The Caitanya Sampradaya of Bengal traces its origin to Madhvacharya. Yet Caitanya Sampradaya has greater affinity with the sect of Vallabha. Sankaradeva spread Vaishnavism in Assam and supressed Buddhism. The Vaishnavism of Sankaradeva is different from Caitanya's Vaishnavism, because the aspect of Madhura rasa or love relationship between the lover and the loved as the mode of worship is absent in Sankaradeva's Vaishnavism.

Sri Ramanuja's (1017-1137) Visishtadvaita system of philosophy contains the Vaishnava Doctrine of the Incarnation of God (different from Sankara's teachings). He emphasized the doctrine of grace. He maintained that God seeks the self more than the self seeks of God. God is inescapable redeemer who in his infinite mercy assumes suitable forms to recover and reunite with the lost life. 12

The question of the manifestation of God, the infinite being, in a finite form perplexing to logical reasoning. Ramanuja's Visishtadvaita gives room for
avataras unlike the monism of Sankara. His theory of avataras is based on the authority of scripture. He believes that the "Infinite can have a finite form of divine essence -which indeed amounts to the anthropomorphic attitude towards God."13

The advocates of the Vaishnava School prefer to think of Brahman - which they identify with Vishnu - as possessed of infinite attributes rather than as attributeless Brahman of Sankara. According to them, Brahman or God is possessed of eternal attributes representing the values of Truth, Beauty, Goodness, Holiness, and Bliss. To them, world is not appearance, but the body of God and a field for spiritual development of man. The devotionalsim of Vaishnavism is based on the experience of the love of God and individual man gets salvation through the grace of God.

Vedantacharys, a follower of Ramanuja, made some reforms in the Vaishnava faith. This gave rise to the formation of two rival parties among Ramanuja's followers. One is called the Northern School (Vadagalai) and the other the Southern School (Tengalai). The Tengalais regard self-surrender as the only way to salvation whereas the Vadargalais think that it is only one of the ways. The Vadargalais believe that the Bhakta or devotee is like a young monkey clinging to its mother (The monkey).
Theory) while the Southern School believes that Bhakta is like a kitten which is carried about by the cat (The Cat Theory). The Southern School has compiled Nalayira Prabandha of 4,000 verses in Tamil as their Veda. Northern School, on the other hand, accepted the Sanskrit Vedas.

Caitanya's devotionalism is different from that of Ramanuja. To Caitanya, the union of Krishna and Radha in Vrindaban is the model of divine existence and love. As a result the emotional content of love becomes predominant in Caitanya movement. But the philosophy developed by this School is the same as that of Ramanuja. They also believe in a personal God. To them world is the manifestation of God, and not illusion.

The Caitanya School believes in jivanmukti - enjoyment of liberation - even whilst in the body, a state in which man realises that he is part of God. The culmination of liberation is in the participation of man in the joy of God's being. He only experiences joy of God. To Ramanuja, on the other hand, love of God is only leading to liberation after death. To Caitanya salvation is attained in this life by experiencing the love of God. For example, Sri Ramakrishna Pramahamsa, while experiencing all diverse faiths, regarded himself as Radha and experienced the ecstasy of Krishna-Prem.
In Vaishnavism, in whatever form it exists in different parts of India, one thing is common, that is devotionalism or Bhakti movement. Vaishnavites are mainly the worshippers of Krishna who believed to be the incarnation of Vishnu.


We notice a preparation for the Doctrine of Incarnation in the Vedas, though it appears in its developed form in the Epics. It is in the Puranas, the Doctrine of Avatara is fully developed. Puranas deal with the description of avatars including the number and types of incarnations.

Vedas tell that Vishnu is one of the Vedic gods. Agni (god of fire), Surya (sun or light deities), Indra (the creator), Vayu (storm or wind god) are important Vedic gods. M. Gupta Shakti writes that Vishnu is an old Vedic god, mentioned in all the four Vedas. He is identified with sun. According to some, he denotes the different forms of light, i.e., fire, lightning, and solar light and according to others the different positions of the sun, i.e., rising, culmination, and setting. In the later definition, Vishnu, as Narayana, is said to reside in the orb of the sun and as such
Vishnu is till today worshipped on Sundays and other prescribed auspicious occasions as Surya-Narayana. In Vedas Vishnu is also represented as one of the Adityas, the sons of Aditi. In the Mahabharata, Vishnu is mentioned as one of the twelve Adityas. "Vishnu's gradual rise to importance in the later Vedic period is mainly because he is conceived in the Vedas as sacrifice and is worshipped thus as Yajna-Narayana." Vishnu as sacrifice became the most important of the gods. Indeed, the description of Vishnu in the Puranas is quite different from that in the Vedas.

Puranas might have been written at a later period than the Epics, because some of the avatars mentioned in the Puranas were Just heroes in the Mahabharata and Ramayana. During the Vedic period there were many gods worshipped by the people, but Puranas were written mainly in praise of three gods - Brahma, Vishnu, Siva.

Brahma is regarded as a personal creator god, one of the great Hindu Trimurti - Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva. He is of comparatively little importance as a cult figure. It is said that there is but one temple to him in whole of India.

Vishnu is called the second person of Hindu Trimurti or Triad. This does not mean that Vishnu is in any way inferior to Brahma. Wilkins refers to "Padma Purana"
where Vishnu is identified with Brahma and Siva.

"In the beginning of creation, the great Vishnu, desirous of creating the whole world became three-fold — creator, preserver, destroyer. Therefore, let the pious make no difference between the three."17

Siva is the third person of the Hindu Triad. As Brahma was creator, Vishnu preserver, Siva was regarded as the destroyer to complete the system. Since death is only a gate-way to another non-existence, Siva should be treated not as destroyer, but re-creator.

Vaishnavism is concerned with Vishnu and his incar­nations only. Puranas give the list and description of avatars of Vishnu. There is no certainty as to the number of avatars of Vishnu. Whenever there was human wickedness causing unbearable nuisance to the gods, Vishnu had to lay aside his invisibility and come to earth in some form. Some mention twenty four incar­nations, and some declare that there are innumerable incarnations. In Srimad Bhāgavatam the number is twenty two. In Bhagavata Purana, in one context it is twenty two and in another context it is seventeen. How­ever, ten is the commonly accepted number. They are:
1. Fish, 2. Tortoise, 3. Boar, 4. Man-lion, 5. Dwarf, 6. Parasurama, 7. Ram, 8. Krishna, 9. Buddha, 10. Kalki.18 Of these ten, nine have already been accomplished, the last one, the Kalki has still to
come. Wilkins mentions:

"Some of the Avatāras are of an entirely cosmical character, others, however, are probably based on historical events, the leading personage of which was gradually endowed with divine attributes, until he was regarded as the incarnation of the deity himself."

Incarnations of Vishnu are classified under three heads:—

1. Complete incarnations, e.g., Ramachandra and Krishna;
2. Partial incarnation of a permanent nature (Amsha), e.g., Buddha;
3. Partial incarnation of a temporary nature, e.g., Parasurama who handed over his own divine powers to Ramachandra and retired to the mountains after accomplishing his mission.


We shall discuss here briefly the characteristics of the ten incarnations of Vishnu. Of course we have to note here that we do not have any authentic record regarding the selection of ten avatāras out of a longer list.

Annie Besant, in her third lecture on 'Avatāras', has given an impressive account of the ten avatāras of Vishnu. She says that to the modern mind the accounts of avatāras, especially the first four are fantastic, unintelligible, and incomprehensible. But she gives convincing interpretations to the avatāras described in the Purānas. She states:
When you read the Puranas you consistently get the fact on the higher plane described in terms of the lower, with the result that it seems unintelligible, seems incomprehensible; then you have what is called an allegory, that is, a reality which looks like a fancy down here, but is a deeper truth than the illusion of physical matter and is nearer to the reality of things than the things which you call objective and real. Annie Besant is of the opinion that if we read the Puranas in this spirit we will understand the meaning of avataras in a better way. The first three avataras—Matsya, Kurma, and Varaha—are strange animals. How strange it is to think that the supreme God should take the form of these lower animals. The reason is, for God, man is not the only worthy vessel to be used for manifestations. These three avataras are often considered as manifestations of Prajapati or Brahma; but at the same time they are included in the list of the ten incarnations.

Another convincing account of incarnations of Vishnu is given by Shakti M. Gupta. According to him the planets are also considered as connected with the incarnations of Vishnu.

"As Vishnu comes to earth to preserve law and righteousness, the auspicious planets also likewise make their appearance. Therefore, the incarnations of Vishnu are also considered as incarnations of the planets. For instance Rama-Chandra is the incarnation of Sūrya; Krishna of Soma, the moon; Nṛsimha of Mars; Buddha of Mercury; the Dwarf Vāmana is Brahaspati or Jupiter; Parashurama is Venus; the Tortoise is Saturn; the Boar is Rahu and the Fish is Ketu."
2.B.3:1. The Matsya Avatara. This avatara of Vishnu is discussed in different Puranas in different ways. The object of this incarnation was to save Manu Sātyavrata, the progenitor of human race, from the destruction by a deluge. A small fish appeared in his hand while offering an oblation of water to the manes in the river Kṛtāmāla. This fish asked for his protection. Manu Satyavrata put the fish in a jar. But to his great surprise it grew very fast, even the river could not contain it. Then it was transferred to the ocean. By now Manu realised the divinity of the fish who revealed to him its identity. It also predicted the approaching end of the world by a deluge. An ark was arranged for saving Manu and his family.

We notice in the Bible (Genesis Ch. 3) a similar story of flood from which Noah and his family were saved by arranging an ark. The people of the whole world belong to the three families—Semitic, Japhethetic, and Hamite, (according to some scholars)—from the three sons of Noah. Probably people who scattered throughout the world after the flood might have carried with them this flood story. As a result we have today similar stories in many parts of the world with slight modifications.

The Bhagavata Purana mentions that Matsya recovered
the Vedas from the demon Hayagriva who had stolen them from Brahma. The Vedas were given to Manu to guide the human race during the present cycle of four yugas.

2.B.3.2. The Kurma avatara. The account of Kurma avatara (the Tortoise incarnation) is found in the Puranas. It is mentioned that Vishnu appeared in the form of a tortoise in the Śatya-yuga of first age to recover something of value which had been lost in the deluge. Vishnu advised the gods to churn the ocean of milk after putting all medicinal herbs into it using the mount Mandāra as the churning stick and the great serpent Vasuki as the rope around it. The gods had to seek the help of Asuras to accomplish this task. They continued this churning until they recovered some fourteen precious articles (probably values). Vishnu took the form of a tortoise, went to the bottom of the ocean and supported the mountain on his back to help them, while the process of churning was going on.

We need to give an intelligible interpretation to this tortoise incarnation. Probably, this story is also connected to the flood story. People who scattered to different parts of the earth carried with them the flood story though it appeared in different forms. This is one of the stories to tell how the earth was recovered miraculously with the help of God as in the case of the appearance of butter from the buttermilk.
2.B.3.3. The Varaha avatara, (The Boar incarnation). The Boar incarnation mentioned in Puranas also seems to be connected to the flood story and at the same time it is an allegorical representation of the redemption of the world from the deluge of sin. Vishnu took the form of a boar to raise the earth from the bottom of the sea, probably after the flood. This is also an account given to the appearance of earth after flood.

2.B.3.4. The Narasimha avatara, (The Man-lion incarnation). This avatara also appeared in the Satya-yuga along with the other three. Vishnu assumed this form to deliver the world from the tyranny of a demon Hiranyakasipu representing the evil forces of this world working against worship of God. Prahlada, the son of Hiranyakasipu represents the righteous people who are the worshippers of God (Vishnu). Probably, this story was formulated to give an account of the way the worship of God was restored after the flood.

2.B.3.5. The Vamana avatara, (The Dwarf incarnation). This is originally attributed to the three strides of Vishnu, the Sun God spoken of in the Rg-Veda. Bali, the grandson of Prahlada, was the king of the asuras in the second age (Treta-yuga). He assumed power over the three worlds. Then Vishnu had to incarnate to destroy the power of Bali who appeared to be very generous to people. This mythical story is connected to the harvest festival of Kerala (Onam festival).
This is only a modified form of the story of three strides of Vishnu mentioned in Rg-Veda. The Vamana (Dwarf) begged of Bali as much land as he could step over in three paces. The generous monarch promised to give him what he wanted. Then the dwarf grew in size and in two strides covered the earth and the heaven and there being no space left for the third stride, he put his foot on the head of Bali and pushed him down into the nether region (Pātalaloka). Vishnu, thus, through his Vamana avatara saved the three worlds from the atrocities of asuras.

2.B.3.6. Parashurama avatara, (Rama with the axe incarnation). This story might have been invented by the Brahmins to show their supremacy over the Kshatriyas. Brahmins by caste are not supposed to engage in war. Therefore they had to tell that Vishnu himself came to rescue them from the Kshatriyas who opposed the Brahmins. Thus Parashurama avatara of Vishnu was to restore special order that had been disturbed by the Kshatriyas. One of the Kshatriya, Kārtavirya, took away Kāmadhenu, the cow of plenty, from the house of Parashurama's father. Parashurama was enraged at this and in twenty one battles with the Kshatriyas he destroyed all the Kshatriyas on earth. It is believed that the present day Kshatriyas are the descendents of Brahmin men and Kshatriya women, according to Shakti M. Gupta.23

2.B.3.7. Ramachandra avatara, (Shri Rama incarnation). The
Shri Rama incarnation is the next one. Vishnu took the form of a man to kill the ten-headed demon Rāvana, the ruler of Sri Lanka. Ramachandra, the hero of Ramayana, was born in the Treta-yuga or second age as the son of Dasaratha, King of Ayodhya, of the solar race. He was possessing hundred percent divinity. At the same time Lakshmi, his consort was born as Sita, the daughter of Dharani, the mother eart. When Sita was carried away by Rāvana, Rama had to kill him to restore Sita and thereby re-establish justice on earth and happiness to mankind. This avatara is based on the great Epic Ramayana. Whether this Epic is written on the basis of any historical event is doubtful. However, one thing is probable, when the Aryans invaded India, they had to wage war against the aboriginals of this land whom they might have considered as asuras. To exalt the Brahmanic religion and Brahmana caste they might have formulated stories to justify the religious sanction to overcome the anti-Brahmanic forces. The great Epic Mahabharata also deals with the question of clash between the Aryans and the aboriginals.

2.B.3.8. Krishna avatar. The Krishna avatar of Vishnu is foundamental in Vaishnavism. This is the most popular avatar. He is considered as the perfect manifestation of Vishnu who was born as Krishna, son of Devaki, the sister of Kamsa. Balaram was his brother. The name Krishna in-
dicates that he is the one who attracts everything and every one to himself. He is the eternal child, the eternal teacher, and the eternal lover.

It is believed that along with Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu, all the gods who were his associates also were born with him such as Nanda, his adopted father; Yashoda, his adopted mother; Devaki, his real mother; Vasudeva, his real father; cows and cow-herds. Krishna's wife Rukmini is Lakshmi. His sacred city Madura is the essence that came when the earth was churned. He lived with his 16,000 wives at Dwāraka. He had all, by his various wives, 180,000 sons. Krishna was cursed by Rṣhi Durväsa to die through his heel which was the only vulnerable spot on his body. By mistake one hunter struck an arrow into the heel of Krishna and he died. When Krishna was exalted to the position of God-head, his elder brother Balarama took his place as the eighth avatar. This description of Krishna avatar should be treated as allegorical or imagery. (Krishna incarnation will be discussed in detail elsewhere.)

2.B.3.9. Buddha. Buddha, as an incarnation of Vishnu, has been denied by many scholars. W.J. Wilkins refers to Colonel Kennedy who argues that the Buddha of the Puranas and the Buddha, the founder of the Buddhist system of religion,
have nothing in common but the name. Colonel Kennedy might have thought in that way because of the antagonism between Hinduism and Buddhism. Buddhism being Atheistic, the only way to interpret Buddha of Buddhism as the incarnation of Vishnu is to believe that Vishnu took the form of Buddha in the Kali-yuga to mislead the wicked people to destruction. But this view is not convincing. Therefore Kennedy's view is much more probable.

2.B.3,10. Kalki avatara. The Kalki avatara is the last incarnation which is not yet taken place, but is expected to appear at the end of the Kali-yuga. He is expected to come riding a white horse with drawn sword blazing for the final destruction of the wicked. In the Vishnu Puranā, the character of this age (Kali-yuga) is vividly described in words that seem prophetic.

The recent development in the doctrine of avatara in Vaishnavism will be discussed in the next chapter along with the views of different Vaishnava theologians.

So far we have discussed the origin and development of the concept of incarnation in Vaishnavism and Christianity. We have to note that the Christian concept of incarnation is still changing due to the influence of Contemporary Western philosophy, whereas, the Vaishnava doctrine of avatara is not much changed. However, we need to understand
the concept of incarnation in both religions in the light of the recent developments in philosophy and theology. Therefore, we shall discuss the concept of avatara in Vaishnavism and incarnation in Christianity separately before we make a comparative study of them.

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