Pre-Nicene Christology: Council of Nicaea In Context

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Abstract: This article presents and discusses the various speculations that existed before the convocation of the ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325. From the apostolic times up to the early fourth century, Christian thinkers, especially the so-called "Fathers of the Church," speculated about five fundamental questions concerning the person and the work of Jesus Christ – namely, (1) his position within the Holy Trinity, specifically his relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit; (2) his role in creation; (3) his role in the salvation of man; (4) his person, particularly his being both God and man at the same time; and (5) his origin, whether he was generated, made, or created by the Father and how. The Church did not yet have clear teachings about these issues at that time. Hence, a dogmatic vacuum existed, which early Christian thinkers tried to fill in. In varying degrees they laid the foundation for a complex Christological discussion before Nicaea, particularly to Arianism, the heretical teachings of which the first ecumenical council tried to address. Knowledge of the theological issues preceding the Arian controversy is necessary in order to better understand the affirmations of Nicaea as contained in the Creed it formulated.

Keywords: Pre-Nicene Christology, early Christian heresies, Church Fathers, Christian Literature, Arianism

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• *PHILIPPINIANA SACRA***,** Vol. LXI, No. 185 (May-August 2026) pp. 175-202.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

Introduction

A quick look at the existing early Christian literature demonstrates that Christological discussions during the first four centuries revolved around five fundamental issues – namely, (a) Christ's position within the Holy Trinity, specifically his relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit; (b) Christ's role in creation; (c) Christ's role in the salvation of man; (d) Christ's person, particularly his being both God and man at the same time; and (e) Christ's origin, whether he was generated, made, or created by the Father and how. Two of these issues – viz. Christ's position within the Holy Trinity and his origin – concern what we technically term in modern theology as the life *ad intra* of the Trinity, while three of such issues – viz. Christ's role in creation and in human salvation and his two natures – concern what we describe as "economic Trinity" or the life *ad extra* of the Trinity. In this regard, Irenaeus (ca. 130-202) was right in distinguishing between two ways of looking at God – (a) God's existence in his intrinsic being, and (b) God as manifesting himself in the "economy" of creation and salvation.[1] Our presentation will revolve around the aforementioned Christological issues.

It is impossible to go over the vast early Christian literature concerning Christ in a short presentation. Hence, this paper will only cite some representative authors and their ideas, putting them in their proper historical context and classifying them according to the five main issues we have mentioned above. We shall divide our presentation into two Parts. The first Part will be on the person of Christ and on the existence of two natures in him, while the second Part will be on Christ's role in creation, his position within the Holy Trinity (particularly his relation with the Father), and his role in salvation. A short summary will be given at the end of each Part.

This paper is about pre-Nicene Christology – that is, Christology before the year 325. But what does "Christology" mean, in the first place? Christology is sometimes taken to mean the study of the various ascriptions "of honor, titles, and even deity to Jesus Christ for what he has done and who he is."[2] On the other hand, Christology is often taken in the narrow sense of a discourse concerning the relation between the divine and the human in Christ.[3] However, in line with the five themes we have mentioned earlier, Christology discusses questions that go well beyond that particular issue. It also tackles, for example, the place of Christ

[1] John Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1965), 104.

[2] Willi Marxsen, *The Beginnings of Christology*, translated by Paul Achtmeier and Lorenz Nieting (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 7.

[3] John Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 138.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

in the Holy Trinity, his role in creation, his earthly mission, and so forth.[4] It is in this broader sense that we shall talk about pre-Nicene Christology – or better still, "Christologies" or theological speculations on the part of early Christian writers and the teachings of the Church about Christ. We will also not delve into the distinction of whether Christology should deal only with the search for the historical Jesus or whether it should focus on Christ in the *kerygma* of the Church. We take these two as aspects of one and the same Christological discourse. Wolfhart Pannenberg would say: "The Jesus proclaimed today is none other than the one who lived at that time in Palestine,"[5] or in the words of Martin Kähler: "The real Christ is the preached Christ."[6] We would rather focus on how Christian believers' faith in Jesus evolved over time and how it was gradually elaborated on theologically.

A discussion of the various Christological issues during the early centuries will provide us with the proper context within which the Council of Nicaea of 325 worked. It was a long process that eventually led to the Arian controversy of the fourth century, which was one of the main points discussed during the first ecumenical council (without, however, limiting itself to it). There were both theological and political issues involved (but we shall focus only on the theological questions). Terminology had to be clarified[7] and the over-all historical and cultural context within which Western and Eastern thinkers operated must be considered.

Part One

Faith during the apostolic times

Christology grew out of the Trinitarian theology of the early centuries. The belief in the existence of three Persons in the Holy Trinity was an integral part of the apostolic tradition and Christian faith right from the very beginning. We can see this in the Bible itself (cf. Mt 28:19; 1Jn 5:7-8) and in the early liturgy of the Church (cf. Trinitarian blessing in 2Cor 13:13), in her catechetical practice

[4] Cf. Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer, *Documents in Early Christian Thought* (Cambridge/London/New York/Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 43.

[5] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus God and Man*, translated by Lewis Wilkins and Duane Priebe (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1976), 21.

[6] Cited in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus God and Man*, 22.

[7] Jules Lebreton and Jacques Zeiller, *Heresy and Orthodoxy*, in *A History of the Early Church*, Book 3 (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 148.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

(e.g. baptismal formula; doxology; Eucharistic prayer)[8] and preaching, to which the Apostolic Fathers bear witness.[9] However, no formal formulation existed yet; no Creed, no *symbolum fidei*.[10] The New Testament itself contains no explicit doctrine of the Trinity.[11] Yes, the Apostolic Fathers have left us testimonies about the liturgy, catechetical practices, and other traditions of the early Church, but they did not really provide us with any elaborate and systematic theological reflection on the contents of the faith. They simply echoed what was written in the Sacred Scripture, trying to explain them according to the faith of the Church at that time or through some philosophical reasoning. Stereotyped creeds were not yet formulated. However, we later witness a gradual movement towards the composition of semi-fixed formularies.[12] We see this, for example, in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch (†108/140) and Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165), among others. We also see early formulations of the "rule of faith" (*regula fidei*) from the second century onwards.[13] From the materials provided by the preaching and worshipping of the early Church, Christian writers of the first centuries had to construct more sophisticated accounts of the Christian teachings about the Holy Trinity, initially focused on the Godhead.[14]

As to Christ, his divinity was readily accepted by early believers. He was seen as co-eternal with the Father. He was considered as distinct from the Father but equally divine. At a certain point he was incarnated and became the Savior of the world. A distinction was later made between the pre-existent Christ – that is, Christ prior to creation – and the "economic" Christ – that is, Christ as God manifested in time. In his state of pre-existence, sometimes no clear distinction was made between him and the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Son of God was sometimes identified with the Holy Spirit in his state of pre-existence. The two started to be seen as distinct only after the incarnation. We see this, for example, in *The Shepherd of Hermas* (cf. second similitude), dated back to the late first or the early second century.

[8] Edward Hardy, ed., *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), 16.

[9] Cf. Clement of Rome, Barnabas, et al.

[10] Justo González, *The Story of Christianity*, in *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, Vol. 1 (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1984), 63.

[11] Hans Schwarz, *Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 138.

[12] Adolf Ritter, "Creeds" in *Early Christianity. Origins and Evolution to AD 600*, edited by Ian Hazlett (London: SPCK, 1991), 92-100.

[13] Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.10.1 (= PG 5.510-511) and *Demonstratio apostolicae praedicationis* 6 – cf. Guido Bosio, Enrico dal Covolo and Mario Maritano, *Introduzione ai Padri della Chiesa. Secoli II e III* (Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1991), 37.

[14] John Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 90.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

Theophilus of Antioch (†183) was the first one to apply the term "triad" to the Godhead, having in mind God and his Word and Wisdom.[15] Like his contemporaries, he thought within the framework of Jewish monotheism and Monarchianism.[16] The existence of God was not in question. He was seen as the supreme Godhead, eternal, ineffable, transcendent, immutable, etc. Aside from him was the Word and the Spirit. The Word (*Logos*) was considered as God's immanent rationality through which creation was carried out. But the question then was: What was the status of the Word and his Wisdom in the triad? Was the Son equally divine with the Godhead? If yes, would this not compromise the existence of one God? This point would be clarified by later Christian thinkers.

Going back to Christ, the belief in his pre-existence and his having two natures – one "according to the flesh" (κατὰ σάρκα) and the other one "according to spirit" (κατὰ πνεῦμα) – was a datum of faith accepted by the early Church. Biblical data support it: Christ had both flesh and spirit (cf. Jn 1:14; 1Jn 4:2-3; Lk 24:39; Heb 5:7; Rom 8:9; 1Pt 1:11; Gal 4:6; etc.), while his pre-existence seems to be suggested by the Prologue of the fourth Gospel (Jn 1:1-3) and other passages (cf. Jn 3:13; 6:38; 17:5; also see Col 1:15-16). These point were regarded as "the foundation datum of all later Christological development."[17] The person of the Holy Spirit, on the other hand, was not yet well defined, or at least was given "ancillary attention."[18] He was seen simply as the "Spirit of Christ"[19] that inspires the prophets, enlightens our minds, and sanctifies us. Note that while early Christians believed in the existence of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, there was a strong tendency to see things with reference to the Godhead, which reflects the strong influence of Jewish monotheism on the early Christian writers.

Christ and his two natures

The situation changed from the second century onwards as questions concerning the person of Christ, on the one hand, and the relationship among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, on the other, were raised. The role of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity in creation was also given attention to. Thus, speculations started, eventually leading to the formulation of Creeds, which later

[15] John Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 102; cf. Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church: The Story of the Emergent Church from the Apostolic Age to the Foundation of the Church of Rome* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1967), 86.

[16] Cf. Hans Schwarz, *Christology*, 139-140.

[17] John Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 138.

[18] Hans Schwarz, *Christology*, 138.

[19] José de Mesa and Lode Wostyn, *Doing Christology. The Re-Appropriation of a Tradition* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1993), 283.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

became the point of reference in distinguishing between what was acceptable to believe in ("orthodox") and what was not.[20] Early Creeds then functioned as "intra-mural delimitation,"[21] the "norm" of the "orthodox" Church.[22]

The second century had seen some early attempts to formulate a creed. We have some examples in Ignatius of Antioch († ca. 130/140)[23] and Justin Martyr († ca. 163/167),[24] but it is in Irenaeus († ca. 200/202) that we encounter a somewhat elaborate formulation of creed. Thus we read: "[The Church believes] in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents and the birth from a virgin, and the passion and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus our Lord, and His [future] manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father 'to gather all things in one,' and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race … and that He should execute just judgment towards all ….."[25] Irenaeus then says that all of these have been preserved by the Church and received from the preaching of the apostles – thus forming "apostolic tradition."[26]

Context

As we have already mentioned, the need to expound and elaborate on the Christian faith in the Holy Trinity was not immediately felt during the first and early second centuries. Early Christians simply accepted what was written in the Scripture and what was handed over to them by the Church. However, the situation gradually changed, on the one hand, with the growing contrast between Jewish monotheism and the Christian faith, and, on the other, with the challenge posed by pagan intellectuals and the influence of philosophy. The affirmation of the existence of what later theology termed as "persons" in one God was seen as a threat to the faith in one God. The main concern of early Christian thinkers, therefore, was the preservation of the fundamental tenet of monotheism inherited from Judaism.[27] On the other hand, faith in a plurality of persons in God easily lent itself to the impression of polytheism similar to that of paganism – thus

[20] Cf. Justo González, *The Story of Christianity*, 64.

[21] Adolf Ritter, "Creeds," 93.

[22] Adolf Ritter, "Creeds," 94.

[23] Cf. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Ephesios* 18, *Ad Trallianos* 9, *Ad Smyrnaeos* 1. Cf. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (The Writings of the Fathers down to AD 325), (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 57, 69-70, and 86.

[24] Justin Martyr, *Apologia Prima pro Christianis* 51; 66; 67 (= PG 4.259-261, 4.281-284).

[25] Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.10.1 (= PG 5.510-511). Translation is of the present author.

[26] Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.10.2 (= PG 5.511).

[27] John Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 108.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

compromising early Christians' faith in only one God. The situation was further exacerbated by Gnosticism with its doctrine of the Pleroma composed of Eons.

In the face of both challenges posed by Jewish monotheism and Gnostic polytheism, early Christian thinkers had to find ways of explaining and rationally justifying their faith in the one and triune God. The first aspect of the then emerging faith that they elaborated on was the relationship between God the Father and the Son. The focus was on Christ and his relationship with God and not so much on the Holy Spirit, and this is understandable. Remember that while early Christians accepted the Jewish belief in God,[28] they derived their distinct identity from their faith in Christ whom they also accepted as God. At the very heart of their faith was the belief that salvation from God is brought by Jesus Christ.[29] This particularity added a new aspect to the monotheistic faith they inherited from the Jews. Christ was at the very center of their faith and, at the same time, they believed him to be the Son of the same God professed by the Jews. As to the Holy Spirit, while they recognized its presence as attested by the Scripture, particularly its role in creation, in sanctification, in the inspiration of the prophets, and so forth, they never looked at it as a threat to their faith in God. It was never a subject of controversy in the beginning.[30] Besides, early Christian writers have left us with a rather confused idea of who the Holy Spirit was for early Christians. Some looked at it as a mere manifestation of God's power, but not an independent entity distinct from and coequal with God. On the other hand, others seem to consider it as an independent person hypostatically different from the Father and the Son.[31] At any rate, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit was far less developed until the middle of the fourth century. The discourse is different when it comes to the Son. He is seen not just as a power of God (although some early Christian writers would consider him as God's thought or reason), but as distinct from and co-equal with God, sharing in his divinity and deserving to be worshipped in the same way. This is clearly expressed, for example, in how early Christian communities developed their own liturgy centered on Christ.[32] In fact, their whole life revolved around their faith in Christ, but again rational elaboration of such faith was lacking.

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[28] Cf. Karl Bihlmeyer, *Church History*, Vol. 1 of *Christian Antiquity* (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1968), 140.

[29] Maurice Wiles, "Orthodoxy and Heresy," in *Early Christianity. Origins and Evolution to AD 600*, edited by Ian Hazlett, 200.

[30] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 2 of *Ante-Nicene Christianity from the Death of John the Apsotle to Constantine the Great, AD 100-325* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1996), 560.

[31] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 561. Cf. Justin Martyr, *Apologia Prima pro Christianis* 1.50-51 (= PG 4.259-260).

[32] William Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, Ltd., 1984), 142.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

Creeds, as we have already said, were formulated only at a certain point. Prior to that, early Christian communities constantly referred to the Sacred Scripture, on the one hand, and to the *regula fidei*, on the other, to determine what was acceptable or not. These two sources of authority were considered as in substantial agreement.[33] The latter was like "a free résumé, fixed in outline" of the former and yet it was wholly flexible in detail as well as in form.[34] To have such guides was necessary in the face of the rising heretical teachings in the early centuries. Note that the term "heresy" did not originally have a pejorative sense.[35] It simply indicated a "choice" (from the Greek verb αἱρέομαι) as to which teachings or ideas to follow. It was only later that the term was taken to indicate a deviation from an already known truth or accepted set of teachings,[36] a distortion of what was considered as the true sense of the Scripture and the original teaching of the Apostles.[37]

Heresies seem to have originated from a desire on the part of some believers to deepen their understanding of some inchoate and variegated tenets of traditionally professed faith.[38] Thus, some scholars would sometimes describe the first heretics in the history of the church as "more sophisticated and more intellectual Christians."[39] "Their faith immediately sought understanding. They were impatient with the hesitant, gradual attempts of those we now see as orthodox to come to terms with the mystery, intolerant of their greater willingness to concentrate on obedience ..."[40] Of course this does not justify the fact that their teachings were later adjudged by the church as unacceptable and detrimental to the true faith. Talking about early century heresies, let us make mention of, at least, four of them – namely, Ebionism, Adoptionism, Docetism, and Gnosticism.

Ebionism

Historians of the Church assert that the first heresies were of either Jewish or pagan origin.[41] Ebionism was definitely of the former type. Concerning the relationship between the two natures in Christ we witness the rise of the so-called"Ebionism" in the second century.[42] The name comes from the Hebrew term

[33] Adolf Ritter, "Creeds," 93.

[34] Adolf Ritter, "Creeds," 94.

[35] Maurice Wiles, "Orthodoxy and Heresy," 198.

[36] Maurice Wiles, "Orthodoxy and Heresy," 198-200.

[37] Maurice Wiles, "Orthodoxy and Heresy," 202.

[38] Cf. Maurice Wiles, "Orthodoxy and Heresy," 201.

[39] Harold Brown, *Heresies. The Image of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy from the Apostles to the Present* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1984), 27.

[40] Harold Brown, *Heresies*, 28.

[41] Karl Bihlmeyer, *Church History*, 141.

[42] Cf. Jean Daniélou, *La Teologia del Giudeo-Cristianesimo* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 1980), 80-90.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

ויבא meaning "poor," which Origen interpreted as referring to its adherents' being "poor" in mind, reasoning or understanding than in anything else.[43] Irenaeus, Origen, Jerome, et al. speak about it.[44] It seems to have originated from among the members of the Jewish-Christian group or Jews converted to the Christian faith.[45] Apocryphal literature traces the group's teachings to Ebion.[46] However, some scholars look at Ebionism as referring rather to a group of Jewish-Christian sects that shared the following ideas: (a) that Jesus was a mere man (ψιλὸς ἄνθρωπος) or *nudus homo*, as Tertullian puts it;[47] (b) that Jesus, while being a man, was the greatest of all the prophets; (c) that he was born out of the normal marital union between Joseph and Mary – hence, they denied the incarnation or the idea that Jesus was born of a virgin and the Holy Spirit; (d) that he did not pre-exist as the eternal Word with God; (e) that Jesus was simply adopted by God when the divine power descended upon him during his baptism at the Jordan River; and (f) that the mission of Jesus after the divine power descended upon him was simply to teach. The Ebionites also insisted on the need to observe every detail of the Mosaic Law, particularly the Sabbath and the practice of circumcision.

The ideas espoused by the Ebionites give us a glimpse into some of the earliest attempts, outside the Bible itself, to understand the person of Christ. The fundamental Jewish monotheism is not hard to discern, in this case. To safeguard God's oneness, the existence of other beings endowed with divine nature had to be denied. Hence, Jesus had to be seen as a mere man, not a god. The Ebionites were radically anti-Trinitarian.[48]

Adoptionism

Along the same line of the Ebionite denial of Jesus' divinity we have the so-called "adoptionists" or "dynamic monarchians." Adoptionism is said to have its roots in Jewish thinking.[49] Our primary sources about Adoptionism are Hippolytus of Rome (†236) and Tertullian (160-240).[50] The origin of dynamic Monarchianism is traditionally traced to Theodotus, a learned Byzantine leather-merchant[51] who was later ex-communicated by Pope Victor in 190, the Synod of

[43] Origen, *De principiis* 4.3.8 (= PG 8.307-309) attributes this to their purely literal interpretation of the Scriptures. Cf. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.27 (= PG 13.114-115).

[44] Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.26.2 (= PG 5.604-605); Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.1 (= PG 8.509); and Jerome, *De viris illustribus* 3 (= PL 2.613).

[45] Cf. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapidsi, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 577-578.

[46] Cf. Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 4.8 (= PL 2.16-17).

[47] Cf. Tertullian, *De carne Christi* 14 (= PL 2.778).

[48] Jean Daniélou, *La Teologia*, 89.

[49] José de Mesa and Lode Wostyn, *Doing Christology*, 269.

[50] Cf. Jules Lebreton and Jacques Zeiller, *Heresy and Orthodoxy*, 147, note 17.

[51] Cf. Jules Lebreton and Jacques Zeiller, *Heresy and Orthodoxy*, 144-146.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

Antioch in 268, and Emperor Aurelian in 272.[52] It distinguished between a purely spiritual "Christ" (the *Logos*) and an ordinary man named "Jesus." The former supposedly descended upon the latter during his baptism at the Jordan River in virtue of his extraordinary virtues. The presence of Christ's spirit in the man Jesus enabled him to perform miracles. However, the union between the *Logos* and Jesus remained purely extrinsic, at most moral. The same teachings were later espoused by Paul of Samosata (200-275).

Paul of Samosata's teachings are presented to us by Hilary of Poitiers,[53] Basil of Caesarea,[54] Eusebius of Caesarea,[55] et al.[56] He denied the personal existence of the Word (*Logos*) prior to its incarnation and failed to clearly distinguish between the "substance" (οὐσία) of the Father and that of the Son. This seems to have been his understanding of the term *homooúsios* (ὁμοούσιος) at that time: the Father and the Son share the same "substance," which practically made them identical or as derived from one and the same primordial substance.[57] The term was also seen as lending itself to possible Sabellian (modalist) interpretation[58] and it was with this understanding that the term was condemned by the Council of Antioch in 268 along with the rest of the teachings of dynamic Monarchianism. A few years later during the 325 Council of Nicaea, the precise meaning of the term was provided by Athanasius himself.[59]

Copies of the acts of the Council of Antioch (268) and Eusebius of Caesarea give us details about the fundamental teachings of Paul of Samosata.[60]

[52] Cf. Harold Brown, *Heresies*, 96-98.

[53] Hilary of Poitiers, *De synodis* 81.860. Cf. W. Sanday (ed.), *St. Hilary of Poitiers, Select Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 25-26.

[54] Basil of Caesarea, *Epistula* 52. Cf. Blomfield Jackson (tr.). *The Treatise De spiritu sancto. The Nine Homilies of the Hexaemeron and the Letters of Saint Basil the Great* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 143ff.

[55] Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia ecclesiastica* 7.27 (= PG 13.283-284).

[56] Cf. Harold Brown, *Heresies*, 98-99; and Pieter Smulders, *The Fathers on Christology. The Development of Christological Dogma from the Bible to the Great Councils*, translated by Lucien Roy (Wisconsin: St. Norbert Abbey Press, 1968), 58-60.

[57] John Henry Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (London/New York/Bombay/Calcutta: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), 192. Cf. Edward Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), 17.

[58] Henry Percival, ed., *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church. Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees Together with the Canons of All the Local Synods which Have Received Ecumenical Acceptance*, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol. 19 of *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 4. Cf. William Loewe, *An Introduction to Christology. Rethinking Jesus' Religious Significance Today* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), 189-190, and Edward Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 15 (on Modalism).

[59] Cf. Athanasius, *Epistula de decretis Nicaenae synodi* 19ff. (= PG 15.1066-1070).

[60] Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia ecclesiastica* 7.27-30 (= PG 13.283-284).

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

Notwithstanding his condemnation, he continued to win some followers, who were still alive during the Council of Nicaea in 325.[61]

Docetism

Both Ebionism and Adoptionism demonstrated docetic traits. Docetism did not really refer to a particular sect, but rather to a tendency to deny the true humanity of Christ and thus meaning "to seem," Docetism affirmed that Christ never came in a real flesh; he did not assume a real but an "apparent" phantasmagorical body during his incarnation.[62] His suffering was also only apparent, not real. In fact, someone else was supposedly crucified in his stead.[63] Ignatius of Antioch seems to be battling with heresies with docetist tendencies in some of his Letters.[64] In his *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*[65] he openly speaks against those who denied that Jesus Christ really suffered in body and spirit, on the one hand, and those who denied that he was born of a virgin, on the other. He then asserts that Jesus truly suffered in order to save us and was truly raised back to life, "not as certain unbelievers say, that he suffered in appearance only."[66]

Scholars discern some traces of docetist tendency even in the New Testament, particularly in the fourth Gospel. This supposedly led St. John the Evangelist to insist on the reality of Jesus' body both during his earthly ministry and after his resurrection (cf. Jn 6:53.56; 20:17.27). Under the influence of ancient Greek philosophy, that affirmed the impassible nature of God and, hence, denied the reality of the incarnation (since God could not assume a real human nature and body subject to change, suffering, etc.,[67] Docetism attempted to explain the compatibility between the passion of the Son of God with the immutability and impassibility of the divine nature.[68] These teachings were refuted and condemned by Polycarp of Smyrna (69-155), Ignatius of Antioch (†108/140), and Tertullian (160-240) (among others).

[61] Cf. Manlio Simonetti, "Paolo di Samosata," in *Dizionario Patristico e di Antichità Cristiane*, Vol. 2, edited by Angelo Di Berardino (Genova: Casa Editrice Marietti, 1994), 2694.

[62] Cf. Joseph Kelly, *The World of the Early Christians* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 180.

[63] Cf. Harold Brown, *Heresies*, 52.

[64] Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 80. Cf. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Ephesios* 6.2 and *Ad Trallianos* 6.1. Cf. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 51-21 and 68.

[65] Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Smyrnaeos* 1.1-2. Cf. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 86.

[66] Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Smyrnaeos* 2. Cf. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 87.

[67] Cf. Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer, *Documents in Early Christian Thought* (Cambridge/London/New York/Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 44.

[68] Hubertus Drobner, *Lehrbuch der Patrologie*, translated into Italian by Paolo Stefano Neri and Francesco Sirleto (Casale Monferrato: Edizioni Piemme, 1998), 103, note 2.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

The very first "docetist" mentioned in Patristic literature is Serapion of Antioch (197-203). Docetic teachings can also be found in some gnostic writings, for example, in the Gospel of Peter – a second century text which, surprisingly, was condemned and rejected by Serapion of Antioch himself.

Gnosticism

Compared with the above-mentioned heretical tendencies and teachings, it was Gnosticism that posed a more serious threat to the Christian church during the early centuries.[69] It espoused the idea that Christ was a purely spiritual being[70] who, at a certain point, united himself for a time with Jesus, a historical personage. Jesus had a body supposedly formed by the Demiurge or Achamoth (᾽Αχαμώθ – Sophia's name outside the Pleroma or the "intention" of the Superior Sophia)[71] from some "psychic" substance[72] made from the passions of Sophia[73] – the last eon in the Pleroma[74] – when they were expelled from her by Achamoth according to Valentinian Gnosticism.[75] Thus, "Jesus Christ" was practically composed of two distinct substances (οὐσίαι) – the spiritual "Christ" and the psychic "Jesus," joined together in a loose sort of liaison. "Christ," being purely spiritual, was not born of a virgin, but rather "passed" through her.[76] He descended upon "Jesus" in the guise of a dove during his baptism at the Jordan River.[77]

Some Gnostics also taught that Christ was sent into the material world with the specific mission to communicate "*gnosis*" (γνῶσις) to a selected few. Such special knowledge[78] was considered necessary for salvation (understood in purely spiritual terms – that is, liberation of spiritual elements or elements of light trapped in the material body).[79] The mission of the Savior (another term Gnostics use for Christ)[80] supposedly started even prior to the creation (since the fall of the divine element took place before creation itself.[81] We refer to the expulsion of Sophia's desire from the Pleroma, in this case.

[69] For reasons behind the success of Gnosticism during the early centuries, cf. William Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, Ltd., 1984), 201-204.

[70] Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 37.

[71] Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.4.1 (= PG 5.463-464).

[72] Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.6.1 (= PG 5.480-481).

[73] Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.4.1 and 1.4.5 (= PG 5.463-464, 5.467-468).

[74] Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.1.1.2-1.2.2 (= PG 5.437-447).

[75] Hans Jonas, *Lo Gnosticismo* (Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1991), 204-205.

[76] Cf. Tertullian, *De carne Christi* 20 (= PL 2.787).

[77] Cf. Hans Jonas, *Lo Gnosticismo*, 221. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.7.2 (= PG 5.487-488).

[78] Joseph Kelly, *The World of the Early Christians*, 182.

[79] Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 36.

[80] Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.3.1 (= PG 5.455-456).

[81] Cf. Hans Jonas, *Lo Gnosticismo*, 65 and 82.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

Elements of Gnosticism can still be found in later doctrines, like in those taught by the Manicheans in the fourth century, which Augustine of Hippo (354-430) spent considerable time and effort refuting.[82]

Summary of Part One

So far we have presented how the faith of the early Christians concerning Jesus Christ during the apostolic time was gradually elaborated on in the succeeding second and third centuries. Heretical teachings emerged along the way that denied either the divinity or the humanity of Christ. For the Ebionites, Jesus was a mere man born from the normal marital union between Mary and Joseph. He was later adopted by God in virtue of his extraordinary virtues. For Gnosticism, on the other hand, "Christ" was a purely spiritual being who, at a certain point, descended upon historical "Jesus," taking on the semblance of a man, with the special mission of communicating *gnosis* necessary for salvation. These speculations are more focused on the two natures of the second Person of the Holy Trinity.

As to the place of Christ in the Holy Trinity, he was considered as God's immanent rationality through which creation was carried out. He was the eternal Word (*Logos*), pre-existing with the Father. The distinction between the Son and the Holy Spirit was not yet well worked-out. Thus, there was a tendency to take them as identical – the Holy Spirit was simply the Spirit of Christ. We will have to wait for later theologians (particularly the Alexandrians) to draw a clearer distinction between the two of them, especially between the roles they played in creation.

At this point we shall focus on the other set of Christological issues during the early centuries – Christ's role in creation and the salvation of man, on the one hand, and his relationship with the Father, on the other.

Part Two

Christ and creation

Concerning the relation between Christ and creation, Irenaeus (ca. 130-202) and Hippolytus of Rome (†236) were among those who provide us with a clear idea about it. Irenaeus asserts that the Father and the Son are co-eternal and that the Word (*Logos*) is God's immanent rationality, extrapolated in creation. God

[82] Cf. Stanley Hopper, "The Anti-Manichean Writings," in *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine,* edited by Roy Battenhouse (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 148-174.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

is the Godhead and the Word and the Spirit were the "hands" he used in creating. Unlike other authors who tend to see the Son and the Spirit as one, he clearly distinguishes between them and points out the specific functions they played in creation. "It is the Word" – he says – "who establishes things – that is, gives them body and bestows the reality of being on them, and [it is] the Spirit who gives order and form."[83] Hence, it is the Word that makes things exist, while the Spirit gives them their proper form. Aside from creation, the Word also serves to reveal the Father and his will,[84] while the Spirit is the agent of prophecy and purification. Irenaeus also considers both of them as equally divine like the Father.

Hippolytus of Rome espoused the same idea of Irenaeus concerning the Father's extrapolation of the Son in view of creation. He engendered the Word, used him to create the universe. Wisdom, on the other hand, was engendered to adorn or give order to what God through the Word has brought into being. More precision was introduced in the discourse by Tertullian (160-240). He was among the first to consider the Word as a "person" (*persona*, πρόσωπον) and, through him (*per filium*)[85] – in contrast to the Western Nicene formula of *filioque*), the Holy Spirit was issued. He, too, is a "person." The three of them are one in "substance." Tertullian was also the first to employ the term *trinitas* and apply it to God. He speaks of *trinitas unius divinitatis*, "trinity of one divinity."[86] It seemed to him that the corresponding term *unus* was more precise than the traditionally used term "*solus*" when referred to God. To *unus* corresponds *unitas* – its abstract counterpart indicating oneness of nature, organic union, spiritual cohesion, etc. With all this technical linguistic qualifications, Tertullian is said to have created a well-defined Trinitarian theology among Latin authors. *Trinitas* for him means "one substance in three Persons."[87]

Certain questions of more philosophical type were not the focus of attention, in this case. For example, the notion of a pre-existent matter (as Platonism would put it) which God could have used in creation, was not discussed. Ancient Greek philosophy talks about it (cf. Plato's *Timaeus*; Porphyry, Proclus); other ancient eastern cosmology as well (like Sumerian, Babylonian, Egyptian, etc.). The Bible itself seems to support it when it narrates how, in the beginning, when

[83] Irenaeus, *Demonstratio apostolicae praedicationis* 5. Cf. S. G. Wilson, "S. Irenaeus, Εἰς ἐπίδειξιν τοῦ ἀποστολικοῦ κηρύγματος. The Proof of the Apostolic Preaching with Seven Fragments, Armenian Version Edited and Translated with the Cooperation of H. R. H. Prince Maxe of Saxony," in *Patrologia Orientalis* (PO), vol. 12, fascicle 5 (Paris: Librairie de Paris, 1919), 666-802 (specifically 663).

[84] Pieter Smulders, *The Fathers on Christology*, 32.

[85] Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean* 4 (= PL 2.159).

[86] Tertullian, *De pudicitia* 21 (= PL 2.1026).

[87] Claudio Moreschini, *Storia della Filosofia Patristica* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2004), 194-197.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

God created the heavens and the earth, "the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters" (Gen 1:2) – pre-existent matter in the form of waters, in this case. Theophilus of Antioch (†183) seems to suggest it,[88] but his statements are subject to different interpretations. Gnosticism, on the other hand, could have espoused a similar notion when it talked about a "psychic substance" expelled from Pleroma out of which the Demiurge or Achamoth created material things. So did God, then, simply bring about creation through the Word and the Spirit using such pre-existent matter? On the other hand, the idea of "creation out of nothingness" (*creatio ex nihilo*) was also not well-elaborated. However, scholars say that the question was already looming on the horizon in the late second and the early third centuries under the influence of Platonism on Christian writers.[89] Tertullian (160-240) already talked about it in his polemic with Hermogenes. At any rate, whether we are talking about a *creatio ex nihilo* or a *creatio ex materia*, early Christian literature accepted the idea that creation came about through the Word or through the instrumentality of the second Person of the Trinity. The general consensus also was that such Word was pre-existent – meaning, it was already with the Father before creation itself. Now, as to whether the Word was "made" in some way by the Father before time and creation or not, is another question. Related to this last point would be the question of whether God had always had Son – and, therefore, had always been a "Father" – or not. These would be some of the issues to be addressed later by Arius.

Christ and salvation

Christ's extrapolation by the Father concerned not only the act of creation. While early Christian thinkers agreed that the eternal *Logos* did play a special role in creation – in fact it was an accepted belief that God created all things through him, his association with the created world did not end with bringing things into a state of existence (whether *ex nihilo* or *ex materia*). At a certain point the eternal *Logos* himself became just like any of the creatures, subject to both time and space. He did this when he was incarnated and became man.

Scholars point out that a systematic treatment of the Christian doctrine of salvation was lacking in the first two centuries. Early Christians were simply "rehearsing the clichés of catechetical instruction" such that what they offered us are just "smacks more of affirmation than explanation."[90] The conviction that Christ

[88] Cf. Theophilus of Antioch, *Apologia ad Autolycum* 2.4. Cf. W. A. Jurgens (tr.). *The Faith of the Early Fathers* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1970), 75.

[89] Blake Ostler, "Out of Nothing; A History of Creation *ex nihilo* in Early Christian Thought," *FARMS Review* 17/22 (2005): 254, 319; and Claudio Moreschini, *Storia della Filosofia Patristica*, 439-442.

[90] John Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 163.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

came into the world, of course, was accepted by all. He came to save us. This was "the fundamental first order assertion" of the early Christian communities.[91] "The Word was made flesh" (ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο), St. John says (1:14). However, as to how he brings about man's salvation was not theologically elaborated on. The consequence or implication of the assertion that the second Person of the Trinity was the Messiah became the object of reflection much later on. The necessity for the eternal *Logos* to become man in order to save humanity was consequently discussed. But if he truly became man, did this not compromise his divinity?[92] Other pertinent questions (like those concerning original sin, its transmission, its effects on human nature, etc. and their relationship with the salvation brought about by Christ) were likewise not thoroughly and systematically discussed. Gnosticism, in this case, was among the first attempts to address the issues.

The idea that salvation presupposes a certain degree of knowledge (*gnosis*, γνῶσις) was widely embraced. Hence, early authors emphasized Christ's role as the communicator of knowledge,[93] while for the various Gnostic schools, salvation and knowledge are identical.[94] However, knowledge itself was not enough to guarantee man's salvation. At a certain point the focus shifted from Christ's role in salvation (as revealer of knowledge, as deifying human nature through his incarnation, etc.) to man's share of responsibility. In reaction to the gnostic teaching about "nature" as the determining factor in human salvation – with the *pneumatics* (πνευματικοί) being automatically saved, the *hylics* or the "materials" (ὑλικοὶ) with no chance of salvation, and the *psychics* (ψυχικοί) being endowed with freewill which they must use properly in order to be saved[95] – the Apologists stressed the role of human freewill[96] and the idea that all men are endowed with it. The Alexandrians (Clement, Origen, et al.) also emphasized this point. Origen, for example, developed the idea of the preexistence of the souls and their eventual embodiment as a consequence of the exercise of their freewill.[97] In this way, the traditional idea that we all sinned "in Adam" was put into question. Associated with this was the idea that all infants were born into this world already tainted with original sin – hence, the necessity of baptism. Now, if the act of sinning is ultimately traced to individual souls' exercise of their freewill, then Adam is no longer to blame for it. Every sin becomes a personal transgression.

[91] José De Mesa and Lode Wostyn, *Doing Christology*, 268.

[92] Hans Schwarz, *Christology*, 137.

[93] Cf. *Didaché* 9.3 and 10.2; *Sancti Hermae Pastor*, similitude 5.4.18ff. and 8.2.2ff. (= PG 1.1564ff. and 1575ff.); *Epistola II ad Corinthos* 1.1 and 7.16-18 (= PG 1.181ff.) Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 13 (= PL 2.26-27); etc.

[94] Pieter Smulders, *The Fathers on Christology*, 33.

[95] Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.7.5 (= PG 5.190-191).

[96] Cf. Justin Martyr, *Apologia Prima pro Christianis* 1.48-49 and 1.61 (= PG 4.255-257, 4.274-275).

[97] Origen, *De principiis* 2.9.6 (= PG 8.202-205).

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

Christ, the eternal *Logos*, came into the world to show man the way to salvation, but it still depends on man's decision if he would follow the way indicated by Christ or not. For those who would listen to him, salvation would consist in the progressive "deification" of human nature. Through his incarnation Christ already demonstrated that such divinization was possible.[98] Thus, we read in Clement of Alexandria: "The Word … became man so that you might learn from man how man may become god."[99] Irenaeus, on the other hand, says: "He became what we are in order to enable us to become what he is."[100] It is in this context that we must understand the early Christian doctrine of "recapitulation" (ἀνακεφαλαίωσις) in Irenaeus, Origen, Hippolytus, and others. It will be the restoration of all fallen souls or rational beings (νόες) (including man) – "*apocatastasis*" (ἀποκατάστασις) – to their pristine transcendental status prior to the Fall.[101] In man's case, it would mean the transformation of the human soul or its fusion with the eternal *Logos*.

Christ and the Holy Trinity

Let us now turn our attention to Christ's relationship with the Father. This point had a very strong repercussion in the Christological discussions shortly before the Nicene period. The theologians of Alexandria in Egypt were the ones who contributed significantly to the speculation about this topic. Their ideas also paved the way to the full blossoming of controversial teachings about Christ, which later became the focus of the Council of Nicaea in 325.

School of Alexandria

The theologians of Alexandria in Egypt contributed considerably to the speculations about the relationship between the Father and the Son.[102] In the forefront of the theological speculations were Clement (ca. 150-215) and Origen (185-254). Their ideas were strongly influenced by Middle Platonism,[103] strict application of which to Trinitarian theology resulted in subordinationism.

Both Clement and Origen regarded God as a monad, absolutely transcendent, ineffable, and incomprehensible. Being beyond any categories of the human mind (like The One of Plotinus), God can be known only *via negativa*

[98] José De Mesa and Lode Wostyn, *Doing Christology*, 267.

[99] Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 1.8.4. Cf. Guido Bosio, Enrico dal Covolo and Mario Maritano, *Introduzione ai Padri della Chiesa*, 258.

[100] Irenaeus, Praef., *Adversus haereses* 5 (= PG 5.1013-1014).

[101] Claudio Moreschini, *Storia della Filosofia Patristica*, 161. Cf. Origen, *De principiis* 1.6.1-2 and 3.5.6-7 (PG 8.137-140, 8.286-287).

[102] Cf. Harold Brown, *Heresies*, 86-94.

[103] Cf. Hans Schwarz, *Christology*, 141; and Loewe, *An Introduction to Christology*, 192.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

or apophatically.[104] However, he can be known to a certain extent only through his Word (compared to the *nous* of Middle Platonism) who is eternally generated by an eternal act (ἀεὶ γεννᾷ αὐτόν),[105] by the Father who, on the other hand, alone is "ingenerate" (ἀγέννητος – distinct from ἀγένητος "uncreated").[106] Being "ingenerate" is considered as an essential characteristic of God. Hence, only the Father, in the strict sense, is God (αὐτόθεος).[107] As to the Son, having been eternally generated by the Father, it cannot be said that "there was when he was not" (ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν).[108] However, the Son remains as a "secondary God" (δεύτερος θεός).

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three distinct "Persons" (ὑποστάσεις) of one and the same divine substance. Take note that the term "*hypostasis*" (ὑπόστασις) and *ousia* (οὐσία) seem to have been taken at that time as synonymous[109] – the only difference is that the former term was Stoic in origin, while the latter was Platonic – both indicating real existence or essence. As to the relationship between the Father and the Son, Origen sometimes represents it as a moral union: their wills are virtually identical.[110] As Son, he issues forth from the Father as the will from the mind (*sicut e mente voluntas*).[111] As to his divinity, he derives it from that of the Father and participates in it.[112] The Father remains as "the fountainhead of deity" (πηγὴ τῆς θεότητος);[113] he alone is God in the strict sense (αὐτόθεος). The Son, yes, is God (θεός) – but not ὁ θεός (as the Prologue of St. John seems to suggest). Thus, "the Son and the Spirit are transcended by the Father just as much as, if not more than, they themselves transcend the realm of inferior beings."[114]

Now, while eternally generated by the Father, the second person of the Holy Trinity was incarnated at a certain point. For Origen, the eternal *Logos* assumed a human soul – that of Jesus, in this case, and not so much a human body. Incarnation (ἐνανθρώπησις)[115] meant union between the eternal *Logos* and the

[104] Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 5.11 (= PG 6.725-730). Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.3.14.
[105] Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 5.11.7.2 and 5.12.81.5 (= PG 6.725-734).
[106] Cf. Henry Percival, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 4-7.
[107] Cf. Hubertus Drobner, *Lerhbuch der Patrologie*, 327.
[108] Origen, *De principiis* 1.2.4 (= PG 8.104-105).
[109] Hubertus Drobner, *Lerhbuch der Patrologie*, 328.
[110] Origen, *Commentarium in Johannem* 13.36.228ff. (= PG 11.225).
[111] Origen, *De principiis* 1.2.6 and 1.2.9 (= PG 8.106-107, 8.109-110).
[112] Origen, *Commentarium in Johannem* 2.2.16 (= PG 11.61-62).
[113] Origen, *Commentarium in Johannem* 2.3.20 (= PG 11.62).
[114] Origen, *Commentarium in Johannem* 13.25.151 (= PG 11.216-217) and *In Matthaeum* 15.10 (= PG 11.799-801).
[115] Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.14 (= PG 8.568-569).

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

human soul of Jesus made possible because the latter has preserved an element of divine transcendence in its inner structure.[116] Methodius of Olympus (†311) – Origen's severe critic – later interpreted this to mean that the human body was a mere receptacle of the *Logos*, or that man simply contained God, but the two natures remained unmixed.[117] He even went to the extent of affirming that the *Logos* took the place of the human mind or soul in man.[118] Justin Martyr (†165 ca.) already somewhat affirmed this when he said that the *Logos* took the place of the human rational soul (νοῦς) in the man Jesus.[119] Thus, while nowhere does Origen say that the human soul of Jesus was replaced or eliminated by the eternal *Logos*, later theologians criticized the emphasis that he placed on the union between the *Logos* and the human soul here instead of focusing on the union between the *Logos* and the human flesh, as Athanasius points out.[120] For Origen, the human soul of Jesus simply allowed the *Logos* to act as its subject. In this way, the human soul was "divinized" or "deified" by the *Logos*.[121]

Compared with other human souls fallen from some noetic world – the world of rational beings (τὰ λογικά), Origen stresses that it was the soul of Jesus alone that remained untouched by the Fall both of the angels (Lucifer and his companions) and of man (Adam and Eve) because it was destined to be chosen by the eternal *Logos* for its incarnation. Thus, "the soul (*sc*. of Jesus) with the Word of God is made Christ" (cf. Col 2:9).[122] The influence of Valentinian Gnosticism[123] and Modalism is not hard to discern here. A few years later, Arius would offer his own interpretation of the incarnation: the divine *Logos* would have changed the human soul, hence the body of Jesus was deprived of a human soul.[124] Apollinarianism – named after Apollinarius of Laodicea (ca. 315-392) – later espoused a similar teaching when it denied the existence of a human soul in Christ.[125]

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[116] Charles Kannengiesser, "Christology," in *A-Z of Origen*, edited by John McGuckin (London: SCM Press, 2006), 77.

[117] Methodius of Olympus, *De resurrectione* 3.2-4 and 3.5 – cf. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6 (Fathers of the Third Century), (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 369-370, and 373-374; and *Convivium decem virginum* (also known as *De castimonia* or *Symposium*) 7.9 – cf. PG 18.135.

[118] John Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 161.

[119] Cf. Justin Martyr, *Apologia Secunda pro Christianis* 95 (= PG 4.519-520).

[120] Athanasius, *De incarnatione* 8 (= PG 11.921-922).

[121] John Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 156.

[122] Origen, *De principiis* 2.64 (= PG 8.156).

[123] Charles Kannengiesser, "Christology," 74.

[124] Charles Kannengiesser, "Christology," 78.

[125] Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer, *Documents in Early Christian Thought*, 44.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

On the way to Origenism

The ideas of Origen had a very strong influence on theologians that came after him. Some of his speculations, originally "exploratory" in nature,[126] intended to be interpreted "speculatively as exercises" and not "dogmatically,"[127] were exaggerated and oversimplified (such as the pre-existence of the souls, *apocatastasis*, the Son's subordination to the Father, etc.). They were also interpreted by the standards of later orthodoxy rather than those of Origen's time. Political factors set in, as well. All of this paved the way for the so-called "Origenist crises" of the fifth and the sixth centuries. Origenist teachings were condemned at the second Council of Constantinople in 553 – long after the demise of Origen himself in 254.

Note how as early as the third and the early fourth centuries we can already witness a certain tendency to underscore the subordinationist nuance of Origen's speculations, particularly the idea that the Son was a creature of the Father (since he was "generated" by the Father). A radical interpretation of Origen's ideas can be found in a letter by Dionysius of Alexandria (†264/265) addressed to bishops Ammonius and Euphranor. These are some of the controversial affirmations it contained: (a) the Father had not always been Father and "the Son was not before he came into existence" – thus, denying the Son's eternity; (b) the Son was not *homooúsios* (ὁμοούσιος) with the Father; and (c) the Son was a creature (ποίημα καὶ γενητόν "made and created"), different in substance from the Father. When the document reached Rome, the pope accused Dionysius of proposing tritheism, which undermined the oneness of God (cf. the term's use on the part of Praxeas, refuted by Tertullian.[128] From the point of view of Jewish monotheism, the teachings of Dionysius were seen as compromising the existence of one God.[129]

Predecessors of Arianism

Origen is often considered as one of the predecessors of Arianism or main influences on Arius (256-336).[130] Some describe Arius as "the most prominent exponent of the left-wing Origenists"[131] who minimized the godhead of Christ in contrast to right-wing Origenists who shortchanged the independence of the

[126] Maurice Wiles, "Orthodoxy and Heresy," 203.

[127] Elizabeth Harding, "Origenist Crises" in *A-Z of Origen*, edited by John McGuckin (London: The SCM Press, 2006), 163-164.

[128] Cf. Claudio Moreschini, *Storia della Filosofia Patristica*, 196.

[129] Cf. Hans Schwarz, *Christology*, 138.

[130] William Loewe, *An Introduction to Christology*, 192.

[131] Hans Schwarz, *Christology*, 142.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

Son. Epiphanius of Salamis directly connects Origen with Arianism and makes several charges against him not relevant to the heresy.[132] Both described the Son as a "creature" (κτίσμα, ποίημα), the firstborn of creation (Col 1:15 cited by Origen).[133] His substance was generated eternally by the Father similar to how the will is generated by the intellect.[134] While Origen distinguishes between God's act of "making" (ποίεν), applying this to the production of everything invisible and spiritual, and the act of "molding" (πλάσσειν), applying this to the creation of anything visible and material[135] – implying that "making" is more applicable in the case of the Son and "molding" in the case of other created beings, the idea could easily be interpreted in the sense that the Son was also created by God and, therefore, was his "creature."

The nuance of subordination is not hard to discern, for anything created is inferior to the one who created it. Origen, indeed, asserts that the Son is not "greater" (ἰσχυρότερον) than the Father, but is "subordinated" (ὑποδεέστερον) to him,[136] even if he recognizes both as equally divine. His actions and power coincide with those of the Father, but in an inferior manner.[137] He is good like the Father, but not in the same degree.[138] He knows the Father, but not to the same extent that the Father knows himself. Some scholars explain that "the subordination of the Son with respect to the Father is a concept which Origen shares with all the representatives of the *Logostheologie* in as much as, also by the influence of some Platonic philosophical schemes, the intermediary function of the *Logos* between God the Father and creation is taken as an expression of inferiority."[139]

Summary of Part Two

In the second part of our presentation we focused on three questions – (a) Christ's role in creation, (b) Christ's role in the salvation of man, and (c) Christ's position within the Holy Trinity. Concerning the first point, we have seen that in the second and the third centuries, Christ's eternity with the Father was already

[132] Richard Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God. The Arian Controversy, 318-381* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 61.

[133] Cf. Origen, *De principiis* 1.2.5 (= PG 8.105-106).

[134] Origen, *De principiis* 1.2.6 and 1.2.9 (= PG 8.106-107, 8.109-110).

[135] Richard Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 64.

[136] Origen, *Commentarium in Johannem* 14 and 28. Book 14 of this Commentary is missing in the 1857 edition of J. P. Migne, while book 28 can be found in PG 11.326ff.

[137] Origen, *De principiis*, Praef. 1.4 (= PG 8.87-93).

[138] Origen, *De principiis* 1.2.13 (PG 8.115-117).

[139] Manlio Simonetti, "Introduzione," *I Principi di Origene* (Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1989), 49.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

accepted. God extrapolated – that is, generated him in view of creation. The question of whether the eternal Word used some preexistent matter or whether he brought it out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) was not yet fully elaborated on, but speculations about it were beginning to surface. The *Logos* and the Holy Spirit both played a role in creation. It was the former that brought things into being, while it was the latter that endowed them with form and order.

Christ's role does not limit itself to creation. While a systematic elaboration of the Christian doctrine of salvation was lacking in the first two centuries, early Christian writers did affirm the necessity of a certain type of knowledge (*gnosis*) for human salvation, and Christ's function as communicator of such knowledge was underscored. On the other hand, in response to the gnostic teachings about salvation, man's possession and exercise of freewill was also emphasized. Man decides on whether he would follow the salvific way revealed by Christ or not. The end was elaborated on in terms of divinization of man or return to his original state before the Fall.

Concerning Christ's position within the Holy Trinity, he was seen as the Father's immanent rationality. The Father was seen as a monad, which is totally ineffable, transcendent, immutable, etc. The only way to know something about him is *via negativa*. However, we can grasp something about him through the revelation of the Son (cf. Mt 11:27). As to his being, it is seen as coming from the Father by eternal generation. This led to the impression that the Son was "created" by the Father. Origen tried to clarify this by distinguishing between the act of "making" (ποίεν), applicable to the production of everything invisible and spiritual, and the act of "molding" (πλάσσειν), applicable to anything visible and material. But it really did not prevent people from thinking that the Son was a "creature" (κτίσμα, ποίημα) of God.

Both the Father and the Son are seen as divine and co-eternal. However, the Son is considered as somewhat subordinate to the Father. His divinity comes from the Father and is a mere participation in the Father's divine substance. Thus, the Father remains as "the fountainhead of deity" (πηγὴ τῆς θεότητος), as Origen puts it.[140] We also made mention of how incarnation is interpreted by the Alexandrian: it is the union between the eternal *Logos* and the human soul of Jesus, which was later interpreted to mean that the body of Jesus was deprived of a human soul. The incarnation of the *Logos* was one of the crucial questions raised not only by the

[140] Origen, *Commentarium in Johannem* 12.3.20. Book 12 of this Commentary is missing in the 1857 edition of J. P. Migne.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslxi185a1

theologians of Alexandria, but by almost all the heresies of the early centuries. In fact, a few centuries later, Augustine would use its acceptance or its rejection as the determining line of demarcation between what is "orthodox" and what is "heretical," affirming that all hitherto heresies denied that Christ came in flesh.[141]

Conclusion

From our brief presentation of the multifaceted speculations about Christ during the early centuries we have seen how they revolved around five fundamental issues – viz. (a) Christ's position within the Holy Trinity, specifically his relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit; (b) Christ's role in creation; (c) Christ's role in the salvation of man, (d) Christ's person, particularly his being both God and man at the same time, and (e) the origin of Christ whether in terms of eternal generation, extrapolation, his being "created" or "made" by God, etc. Note that ideas were presented only as possible explanations of open-ended theological questions when – Charles Kennengiesser would say – "time was hardly ripe for a systematic treatise on Christ"[142] and when a "dogmatic vacuum" existed in Christianity.[143] In other words, the Church did not have any clear stand yet on certain questions and the field was open to freelance theological discussion. However, the speculations of the early Christian writers raised issues which were to become crucial in later Christological theology. Some technical terms also started to be used (such as ὑποστάσεις, οὐσία, πρόσωπον, κτίσμα, ποίημα, etc.,[144] which later had to be clarified or reinterpreted. We also see some of those issues and terminology were taken up during the time of Arius. He would offer his own interpretation and come up with his own teachings which were influenced, in one way or another and in varying degrees, by those who came before him. Questions concerning Christ's divinity, his nature, his co-eternity with the Father, his role in creation, and so forth, would be at the very center of the early fourth century Christological discussion, giving rise to one of the most serious theological debates that eventually solicited the convocation of the very first ecumenical council in the history of the Church. PS

[141] Robert Dodaro, "Omnes Haeretici Negant Christum in Carne Venisse (Aug., Sermo. 183.9.13)," in *Augustinian Studies* 38/1 (2007): 163-174.

[142] Charles Kannengiesser, "Christology," 74.

[143] Charles Kannengiesser, "Christology," 78.

[144] Cf. José De Mesa and Lode Wostyn, *Doing Christology*, 276; and Edward Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 17.

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