

The Evolution of God

3. Fragments of the Apostolic Fathers

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The earliest Christian writers whose works have survived, those known to have direct connections to the Apostles, were Clement of Rome (disciple of Paul), and Polycarp of Smyrna and Ignatius¹ of Antioch (both disciples of John). These authors had been personally instructed by the Apostles and were leaders within the Christian assemblies established by the Apostles. The writings of these men were addressed to fellow believers or assemblies, being pastoral in nature rather than apologetic. They did not attempt to correct or refute heresy. They did not attempt to define doctrines, since commonality of doctrine was assumed between writer and his audience. Yet, these ancient specimens still indicate the common Christian belief in the personal preexistence of the Son of God as the “Word” (Logos) of John’s prologue, and acknowledge His divinity as such.

Earliest Christian Writers with direct Connections to the Apostles:

Clement of Rome:

Clement of Rome referred to the author of certain statements found in the Old Testament as “the holy **Word**,”² and then immediately referred to the same “Word” as a Person, (“and again **He saith** ...”). A second work, written about the same time John wrote Revelation, has historically been attributed to Clement of Rome also.³ This work is believed to be the oldest transcript of a Christian sermon outside the New Testament. 2 Clement affirms two critical points: (a) the preexistence of Christ (Logos) as “Spirit” of God, and (b) His willing transmutation from full divinity to full humanity, exactly as both Paul⁴ and John⁵ indicated.

“We must therefore preserve the flesh as the temple of God. For as ye were called in the flesh, ye shall also come [to be judged] in the flesh. As Christ the Lord who saved us,

¹ The longer version of the Epistles of Ignatius have been heavily edited by later Roman Catholic writers, and cannot be trusted to actually reflect the views of Ignatius.

² 1 Clement, ch. lvi

³ Modern scholarship typically disputes Clement as the author. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged virtually by all that the author lived contiguous to John’s lifetime.

⁴ Phil. 2:5-8; Heb. 2:5-18

⁵ John 1:14

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though He was first a Spirit, became flesh, and thus called us so shall we also receive the reward in this flesh.”⁶

This extremely early sermon indicates a belief in **the real transmutation of the Son of God** from “ Spirit” to “flesh,” from full divinity to full humanity.

Ignatius of Antioch:

Ignatius, disciple of John and pastor of the Antioch assembly, strongly affirmed the preexistence of Christ. He spoke of Jesus Christ as “*possessed both of flesh and spirit; both made and not made; **God existing in flesh**; true life in death; both of Mary and of God.”⁷ Again, Ignatius writes in another epistle: “[T]here is one God, who has manifested Himself by **Jesus Christ His Son, who is His eternal Word**, not proceeding forth from silence, and who in all things pleased Him that sent Him.”⁸ As a contemporary and former student of John’s, it is virtually impossible that Ignatius would misunderstand John’s usage of the term “Logos” (Word) in the prologue of His Gospel.*

Other Christian Writers Contiguous to the Apostolic Age:

There are other Christian works known to have been written very close to John’s death. While virtually nothing is known of the authors, and thus no direct link to one of the Apostles can be positively proven, they nevertheless provide specimens from unified Christian assemblies at the close of the apostolic age.

Barnabas of Alexandria:

The Epistle of Barnabas is usually dated to the end of the first century (AD 100), about the time of John’s death. It comes from the area of Alexandria where there were large Christian and Jewish communities. According to Barnabas, Christians believed the Son was God’s Agent in creation.

*“And further, my brethren: if the Lord endured to suffer for our soul, He being Lord of all the world, **to whom God said at the foundation of the world, “Let us make man after our image, and after our likeness,”** understand how it was that He endured to suffer at the hand of men.”⁹*

And again:

⁶ 2 Clement, ch. ix

⁷ Ignatius, Epistle to the Ephesians, ch. vii (short {original} version)

⁸ Ignatius, Epistle to the Magnesians, ch. viii (short {original} version)

⁹ Epistle of Barnabas, ch. V

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“For the Scripture says concerning us, while He speaks to the Son, “Let Us make man after Our image, and after Our likeness; and let them have dominion over the beasts of the earth, and the fowls of heaven, and the fishes of the sea.””¹⁰

Aristides of Athens:

Another important very early witness still in the shadow of John’s ministry is an apology written by Aristides of Athens and presented to the emperor Hadrian in AD 125.¹¹ Its purpose was to show the superiority of Christianity over both paganism and Judaism, and thus perhaps ease the Roman persecution of Christians.

“Now the Christians trace their origin from the Lord Jesus Christ. And He is acknowledged by the Holy Spirit to be the son of the most high God, who came down from heaven for the salvation of men. And being born of a pure virgin, unbegotten and immaculate He assumed flesh and revealed himself among men that He might recall them to Himself from their wander-lug after many gods. And having accomplished His wonderful dispensation, by a voluntary choice He tasted death on the cross, fulfilling an august dispensation. And after three days He came to life again and ascended into heaven. And if you would read, O King, you may judge the glory of His presence from the holy gospel writing, as it is called among themselves. He had twelve disciples, who after His ascension to heaven went forth into the provinces of the whole world, and declared His greatness. As for instance, one of them traversed the countries about us, proclaiming the doctrine of the truth. From this it is, that they who still observe the righteousness enjoined by their preaching are called Christians.”¹²

From this statement it is clear that Christians around Athens, of which Corinth was nearby, also held to the preexistence of Christ as only-begotten Son of God, having come down from heaven to partake of full humanity through the virgin birth. His subordinate position to the Father is noted by calling Him “*Son of the most high God.*” Notice also that Aristides claimed that this was apostolic tradition from Paul¹³ when he preached and taught in Greece (both Athens and Corinth).

¹⁰ Epistle of Barnabas, ch. VI

¹¹ Eusebius, has a chapter (Ecclesiastical History, Bk. IV., ch iii) titled, “*The authors that wrote in defense of the faith in the reign of Hadrian, A.D. 117-138.*” He writes: “*Aristides also, a man faithfully devoted to the religion we profess, like Quadratus, has left to posterity a defense of the faith, addressed to Hadrian. This work is also preserved by a great number, even to the present day.*” Eusebius in his Chronicon states that the Emperor Hadrian visited Athens in the eighth year of his reign (i.e., A.D. 125) and took part in the Eleusinian mysteries. In the same connection the historian mentions the presentation of Apologies to the Emperor by Quadratus and Aristides, “*an Athenian philosopher;*” and implies that Hadrian was induced by these appeals, coupled with a letter from Serenius Granianus, proconsul of Asia, to issue an Imperial rescript forbidding the punishment of Christians without careful investigation and trial.

¹² Aristides, Apology, ch. XV

¹³ Notice that Aristides believed that Paul was the 12th Apostle, not a 13th.

Early Christian Worship of Jesus Christ

A critical point concerning the earliest Christian view of Christ can also be gleaned from the practice of Christians from apostolic times. The nature of the Son of God as being more than merely a man is clear from the fact that the earliest Christians worshipped the Son along with the Father. For Christians, no other beings were to be worshipped other than the Father, creator of all things, and His only-begotten Son. Jesus Himself, citing Moses, stated that “*You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.*”¹⁴ Yet it was common knowledge from earliest times (even among the Jews) that Christians worshipped the Son of God just as they worshipped God Himself. Had the earliest Christians in apostolic times not viewed the Son as in some sense equal (or equitable) with the Father they could not worship Him as such without transgressing Jesus’ own words above or the Shema. In the Martyrdom of Polycarp,¹⁵ the following account appears which is quite revealing:

*“But when the adversary of the race of the righteous, the envious, malicious, and wicked one, perceived the impressive nature of his martyrdom, and [considered] the blameless life he had led from the beginning, and how he was now crowned with the wreath of immortality, having beyond dispute received his reward, he did his utmost that not the least memorial of him should be taken away by us, although many desired to do this, and to become possessors of his holy flesh. For this end he suggested it to Nicetes, the father of Herod and brother of Alce, to go and entreat the governor not to give up his body to be buried, “lest,” said he, “**forsaking Him that was crucified, they begin to worship this one.**” This he said at the suggestion and urgent persuasion of the Jews, who also watched us, as we sought to take him out of the fire, being ignorant of this, that it is neither possible for us ever to forsake Christ, who suffered for the salvation of such as shall be saved throughout the whole world (the blameless one for sinners), **nor to worship any other. For Him indeed, as being the Son of God, we adore; but the martyrs, as disciples and followers of the Lord, we worthily love on account of their extraordinary affection towards their own King and Master, of whom may we also be made companions and fellow-disciples!**”¹⁶*

Note that it was the Jews in Smyrna who urged the governor not to release Polycarp’s body claiming that the Christians might cease worshipping Christ and worship Polycarp instead. It was therefore common knowledge among the Jews that Christians worshipped the Son of God. The unique place of worship of the Son of God by Christians was absolutely apostolic and biblical.

¹⁴ Matt. 4:10

¹⁵ Early 2nd century

¹⁶ Martyrdom of Polycarp, ch. 17

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Philippians 2:5-8 (NASB)

5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, 11 and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

These quotes are sufficient to show that the preexistence of Christ, His role as God's Agent in creation, His transmutation to become fully human flesh, and His being worshipped along with the Father Himself were all universally accepted Christian teachings among the apostolic Christian assemblies at about the time of John's death. As we now move beyond the shadow of John and his apostolic authority over the assemblies we will see that the post-apostolic Christians remained faithful and consistent for at least a half century after John's death.

Part 4, The Early Christian Apologists

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