

# The Evolution of God

## 2. Corruption in Apostolic Times

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It is important to understand that the corruption of pristine Christian monotheism began during the apostolic age, and was first refuted within the pages of the New Testament itself. Paul had warned the elders of the Ephesian assembly in Asia Minor that false teachers would arise in their location.<sup>1</sup> Then just before his martyrdom, he again warned Timothy who was currently leading the same assembly at Ephesus.<sup>2</sup> Just before his martyrdom, Peter also predicted that men would arise from within the assemblies who would depart from the Faith and deny the Son of God.

*“But there were also false prophets among the people, even as **there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them,** and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.”<sup>3</sup>*

The martyrdom of James, pastor of the Jerusalem assembly, and then Peter and Paul in Rome, created an enormous vacuum of apostolic authority. Shortly thereafter the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and scattered the assemblies of Judea, of which Jude was a member or possibly an elder. The Christians of the Jerusalem assembly heeded Jesus’ warning<sup>4</sup> and escaped Judea just before this occurred. But the apostate teachers took advantage of the vacuum in authoritative Christian leadership and set out in earnest to seduce members of the assemblies away from the true Faith. In this dire situation, Jude, the brother of Jesus and James, wrote an urgent plea to the pastors of the local assemblies scattered throughout the Roman Empire:

*“Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who*

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 20:18-31

<sup>2</sup> 2 Tim. 1:13 – 4:10

<sup>3</sup> 2 Peter 2:1-3

<sup>4</sup> Luke 21:20-22

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*long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and **deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.**"<sup>5</sup>*

This cry for help did not go unnoticed by the aged Apostle John. He had probably been the youngest of Jesus' disciples. About the time Jude wrote this, John took up residence in Ephesus, the hub of the Asia-Minor Christian assemblies, perhaps in response to the crisis that was unfolding in Asia Minor. As the last living Apostle of Jesus Christ who could bear eyewitness testimony to Jesus' physical sufferings, real death, bodily resurrection, and bodily ascension to heaven, John could also recall and record the words of John the Baptist and Jesus Himself to settle with apostolic authority the burning question of the hour: "Who is Jesus and where was He from?" John's intention in writing his five books under the urging and inspiration of the Breath of Truth was not to introduce anything new to "the Faith once for all delivered to the saints." Rather, John sought to validate in writing and with eyewitness authority all that Paul had previously taught to the Gentile assemblies concerning who Jesus Christ is and where He is from. Even the concept of Jesus Christ as "Logos" (Word) was borrowed from Paul.

*Hebrews 4:12-14 LGV*

*12 For **Logos of God** is alive, and effective, sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating until<sup>6</sup> the distribution<sup>7</sup> of both life and breath, of both joints and sinews,<sup>8</sup> and **is the Judge** of inner sentiments and thoughts of the heart. 13 And nothing created is imperceptible in **His sight**, but everything is naked and exposed to **the eyes<sup>9</sup> of Him, the one unto whom we report.** 14 Having then **a great High Priest** who has passed through the heavens – **Jesus the Son of God<sup>10</sup>** – we should cling to the Profession.<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Jude 1:3-4

<sup>6</sup> The Greek word ἄχρι is wrongly translated "to" or "unto" in most versions, with reference to distance or extent. However, without exception, ἄχρι always refers to duration of time in the New Testament, never to distance or extent. It should always be translated "until" (cf. Heb. 3:13 & 6:11).

<sup>7</sup> The Greek word μερισμοῦ is wrongly translated "dividing asunder" (KJV) or "dividing/division" (NKJV, NASB, NIV). In Scripture, it always means "distribution" (deliver to each one his portion). The only other time it appears in the N.T. is Heb. 2:4 where it refers to the distribution of spiritual gifts. In the Septuagint it always refers to the distribution of the Land inheritance to the various tribes of Israel.

<sup>8</sup> Here Paul used a very colorful description of the resurrection. The entire clause, "the distribution of both life and breath, of both joint and sinews," is a direct reference to the resurrection so vividly described in the *Valley of Dry Bones* prophecy in Ezekiel 37:1-14.

<sup>9</sup> The Lamb seated at the Father's side has "seven eyes," which represents "the seven Breaths of God" (Rev. 5:6 & Rev. 1:4). In the 7 Letters, Jesus repeatedly says to the assemblies, "I have observed your works."

<sup>10</sup> Paul linked together the "High Priest" and "Kingly" roles of the 'Son' in Psalm 2 & Psalm 110.

<sup>11</sup> "The Profession" refers to the "rock" on which Christianity is founded, that Jesus is the Christ (the anointed King to sit upon David's throne), the Son of God. (cf. Psalm 2 LXX & Matt. 16:13-18)

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The title, “Logos of God” (ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ), is a name for Jesus, as proven by John’s statement. “*He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called **The Word of God*** (ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ).”<sup>12</sup> Paul followed this title with a series of descriptive terms and pronouns, which can only refer to one Person: “the Judge,” “His sight,” “the eyes of Him, the one to whom we report,” “a great High Priest,” and “Jesus the Son of God.” Thus, “Logos of God” is Jesus Christ according to Paul.<sup>13</sup>

In his Gospel, John placed the mature<sup>14</sup> Pauline theology found in Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Hebrews, right in the mouths of John the Baptist and Jesus Himself! John selectively chose very specific dialogues and events to include in his Gospel which the synoptic Gospel writers had not included. Matthew, Mark, and Luke merely wrote historical narratives to document the life and ministry of Jesus Christ to show that He was the prophesied Messiah. These three Gospels were already being truncated and misused by the false teachers, and pseudo-Gospels were being composed<sup>15</sup> by men who were not eyewitnesses to Jesus’ ministry or resurrection, and were not Apostles commissioned by Jesus Himself.<sup>16</sup> Thus, John stood head and shoulders above all “Christian” teachers in authority and credibility during the last few decades of the first century. Unlike the earlier writers of the synoptic Gospels, John was much more interested in writing from a theological framework, overthrowing contemporary heresies that had arisen concerning the person of Christ due to syncretism with Greek philosophy.

There were two primary false teachers to which Jude referred and whom John sought to refute with his authoritative writings. These were the Nicolaitans,<sup>17</sup> followers of Nicolas (one of the original seven deacons of the Jerusalem assembly, a Greek proselyte to Judaism),<sup>18</sup> and Cerinthus, a Gnostic teacher. Irenaeus, who had been a student of Polycarp who was himself mentored by John, provides further information, showing

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<sup>12</sup> Rev. 19:13

<sup>13</sup> That Paul was the author of Hebrews was attested by many of the earliest Christian writers. What was uncertain was the scribe that he used. The most common opinion was that Luke wrote Hebrews according to Paul’s dictation, since the Greek style and grammar is very polished (like Luke and Acts), and Luke was Paul’s companion to the very end of his life (2 Tim. 4:11). The theology closely parallels Galatians.

<sup>14</sup> Jesus said that the Breath of Truth would guide the Apostles into all truth (Jn. 16:13). A survey of Acts also shows that the Apostles, including Paul, were still being taught by the Breath of Truth throughout their ministries. After Peter’s and Paul’s martyrdom, Jude then referred to the Apostolic teaching as “*the Faith once for all delivered to the saints.*” Thus John’s later teachings were not intended to introduce anything new. Even Revelation does not provide any new teaching, but only affirms the prophets and the former teaching of Jesus and the other Apostles.

<sup>15</sup> The “Gospel of Thomas,” which purports to give an account of Jesus’ childhood, is an example of one of many Gnostic pseudo-Gospels which arose very early.

<sup>16</sup> 2 Cor. 11:12-15

<sup>17</sup> Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. I, ch. xxv; Bk II, ch. xi

<sup>18</sup> Acts 6:5

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that the teachings of the Nicolaitans and Cerinthus were virtually identical regarding God and His Son, Jesus Christ.

*“John, the disciple of the Lord, preaches this faith, and seeks, by the proclamation of the Gospel, to remove that error which by Cerinthus had been disseminated among men, and a long time previously by those termed Nicolaitans, who are an offset of that “knowledge” falsely so called,<sup>19</sup> that he might confound them...”<sup>20</sup>*

Nicolas was probably already dead when John wrote. But the Gnostic cult he founded continued to prosper in Asia Minor during John’s day. This is shown by Jesus’ statements in the letters to the seven assemblies of Asia Minor that He hated the doctrine of “the Nicolaitans.”<sup>21</sup> One of Jesus’ statements was included in the letter to the assembly at Ephesus where Timothy had previously pastored prior to John’s relocating there. Jesus commended the Ephesian assembly because they had “*tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars.*”<sup>22</sup> No doubt those pseudo-apostles included Nicolas and Cerinthus, both of whom had heavy influence in Asia Minor in general and Ephesus in particular. Paul likely referred to both men also in his second letter to Corinth.

*2 Cor. 11:12-15*

*12 But what I do, I will also continue to do, that I may cut off the opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the things of which they boast.*

*13 For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ.*

*14 And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light.*

*15 Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.*

Cerinthus began teaching his Gnostic views during Paul’s day, about AD 50, and continued to about AD 100 when John died. He also established a school in or near Ephesus.<sup>23</sup> Irenaeus recalled a story passed down by Polycarp concerning just how repulsed John was by Cerinthus and his false teaching.

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<sup>19</sup> The clause, “*knowledge falsely so-called*” was an expression used by Paul to describe the doctrines that were a blend of Christianity and Greek philosophy (1 Tim. 6:20-21). Note in the above quote, Irenaeus clearly showed John’s purpose in writing was to overthrow the very same heresies that Paul warned Timothy about decades earlier.

<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Bk. II, ch. xi.

<sup>21</sup> Rev. 2:6,15

<sup>22</sup> Rev. 2:2

<sup>23</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia, Cerinthus

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*“There are also those who heard from him [Polycarp] that John, the disciple of the Lord, going to bathe **at Ephesus**, and perceiving Cerinthus within, rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming, ‘Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within.’ ... Such was the horror which the apostles and their disciples had against holding even verbal communication with any corrupters of the truth; as Paul also says, ‘A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself.’ ... Then, again, **the Church in Ephesus, founded by Paul, and having John remaining among them permanently until the times of Trajan**, is a true witness of the tradition of the apostles.”<sup>24</sup>*

Irenaeus described the teachings of Cerinthus in more detail as follows:

*“Cerinthus, again, a man who was educated in the wisdom of the Egyptians, taught that the world was not made by the primary God, but by a certain Power far separated from him, and at a distance from that Principality who is supreme over the universe, and ignorant of him who is above all. He represented Jesus as having not been born of a virgin, but as being the son of Joseph and Mary according to the ordinary course of human generation, while he nevertheless was more righteous, prudent, and wise than other men. Moreover, after his baptism, Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove from the Supreme Ruler, and that then he proclaimed the unknown Father, and performed miracles. But at last Christ departed from Jesus, and that then Jesus suffered and rose again, while Christ remained impassible, inasmuch as he was a spiritual being.”<sup>25</sup>*

It is noteworthy that Cerinthus and the Nicolaitans distinguished between “Christ” and the man “Jesus.” In both systems Christ was a divine spirit Being who came down from God out of heaven, rested upon the man Jesus at His baptism, and then left Him on the cross to ascend back to heaven. Jesus was just a man like any other. Thus “Jesus” and “the Christ” were allegedly two different persons. This view was the result of syncretism between Christianity and Platonism’s claim that matter was inherently evil yet pure “spirit” was good. Thus, if “the Christ” was a divine Spirit-Person who descended from God out of heaven and became flesh (as the Apostles taught), He would necessarily be corrupted by literally becoming flesh (in Platonic thinking). This created the necessity to divorce the “Christ” who came from heaven from the man “Jesus” if Plato’s view was presupposed. Yet, in addressing the Nicolaitans and

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<sup>24</sup> Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. III, ch. iii:4

<sup>25</sup> Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. I, ch. xxvi

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Cerinthus, John wrote: “Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also.”<sup>26</sup>

Irenaeus stated plainly that John’s purpose in writing his Gospel was to refute the Nicolaitans and Cerinthus, his contemporaries.

*“John, the disciple of the Lord, preaches this faith, and seeks, by the proclamation of the Gospel, to remove that error which by Cerinthus had been disseminated among men, and a long time previously by those termed Nicolaitans, who are an offset of that “knowledge” falsely so called, that he might confound them, and persuade them that there is but one God, who made all things by His Word; and not, as they allege, that the Creator was one, but the Father of the Lord another; and that the Son of the Creator was, forsooth, one, but the Christ from above another, ... The disciple of the Lord therefore desiring to put an end to all such doctrines, and to establish the rule of truth in the Church, that there is one Almighty God, who made all things by His Word, both visible and invisible; showing at the same time, that by the Word, through whom God made the creation, He also bestowed salvation on the men included in the creation; thus commenced His teaching in the Gospel: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him, and without Him was nothing made. What was made was life in Him, and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not.’ ‘All things,’ he says, ‘were made by Him;’ therefore in ‘all things’ this creation of ours is [included],... John, however, does himself put this matter beyond all controversy on our part, when he says, ‘He was in this world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not. He came unto His own [things], and His own [people] received Him not.’”<sup>27</sup>*

One glaring fact stands out in John’s Gospel that should not be missed by the reader. In answering the Nicolaitans and Cerinthus, John did not deny that the Christ was a spirit-being who came down from heaven, which should have been his strongest point in His Gospel given that he intended to refute the Nicolaitans and Cerinthus. But John did exactly the opposite. In the very first chapter John strongly affirmed Christ’s preexistence in heaven with God “in the beginning,” His role in the creation of all things,<sup>28</sup> the fact that no one has ever seen God, yet the Son is the one who has appeared

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<sup>26</sup> 1 John 2:22-23

<sup>27</sup> Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. III, ch. xi

<sup>28</sup> John 1:1-2,10

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to the patriarchs.<sup>29</sup> He even offered the testimony of John the Baptist, that Jesus originated before him, as confirming these theological points.<sup>30</sup> In the following chapters John went on to repeatedly affirm Christ's having come down from heaven, that He was to ascend back to where He was before, and would receive again the glory He possessed with the Father before the world was created. John's Gospel, his epistles, and Revelation all forcefully confirm the earlier teaching of Paul regarding the preexistence of Christ.

Yet contrary to Trinitarianism, John also strongly affirmed the full humanity of Jesus Christ as well. He quoted Jesus' references to Himself as "*the Son of Man*," saying that He was powerless to do the miracles Himself but the Father was doing the works through Him.<sup>31</sup> John harmonized the apparent tension between the same person being "Son of God" and "Son of Man" in a way that was consistent with Old Testament prophecy and with Paul's teaching, using a very simple and concise statement:

*John 1:14*

*14 And the Word [the Son of God] became flesh [Son of Man] and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father [Word, the Son of God], full of grace and truth.*

Thus John completely overthrew the teachings of the Nicolaitans and Cerinthus who claimed to solve the apparent problem by positing that they were two different persons. John insisted they were the same Person, that the divine, only-begotten Son of God, who was God's agent in creation, who appeared as "God" to Adam, the patriarchs, and Moses, and who came down from heaven, **was actually and literally transformed from a divine Person (Son of God) into a fully-human Person (Son of Man)**. In doing so, John was fully supporting the previous teachings of Paul which also showed Christ's preexistence "*the first-produced of all creation*,"<sup>32</sup> and "*the Beginning*,"<sup>33</sup> through whom all things were created,<sup>34</sup> having been "*in the form of God*" and "*equal with God*,"<sup>35</sup> but became entirely human in that He "*emptied Himself*" coming "*in the likeness of men*," then "*being found in fashion as a Man, He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death*." John supported Paul with his own eyewitness testimony and apostolic authority, completely

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<sup>29</sup> John 1:18

<sup>30</sup> John 1:15,27

<sup>31</sup> John 5:19,30; John 14:8-11

<sup>32</sup> Col. 1:15

<sup>33</sup> Col. 1:18

<sup>34</sup> Col. 1:15-17

<sup>35</sup> Phil. 2:5-6

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devastating the opponents who had challenged Paul as a genuine Apostle of Jesus Christ.<sup>36</sup>

*Philippians 2:5-11 (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.*

*Hebrews 2:5- (LGV)*

5 *For He does not subjugate to [His] messengers the impending territory which we are discussing. 6 Yet somewhere one witnesses saying:*

*“What is man, that You are mindful of him, or the son of man that You are visiting him? 7 You made him a little bit below the messengers, You crowned him with glory and honor, and You appointed him over the works of Your hands. 8 You placed everything under his feet.”*

*For in subjecting everything to him, He left nothing outside [man’s] dominion. Yet now we do not yet see everything having been subjected to him. 9 But we see Jesus, “crowned with glory and honor,” having been “made a little bit lower than the messengers” for the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God He might partake of death for every man. 10 For it was proper for Him, the supreme leader of their deliverance, (for whom everything is and through whom everything is), to become perfected through hardship, in leading many sons to glory. 11 For both the consecrating one and those being consecrated are all out of one man [Adam]. For this reason He is not ashamed to call them ‘brothers,’ 12 saying:*

*“I will proclaim Your name to My brothers, in the middle of the Assembly I will sing hymns to You.”*

*And again:*

*“I will have confidence in Him.”*

*And again:*

*“Look! I and the children God gave to Me.”*

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<sup>36</sup> 2 Cor. 11



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14 *Then since the children have partaken of flesh and blood, **He likewise partook of the same, so that through death** He may vanquish the one having the domain of death, who is the Devil, 15 and to release those who were prone to always live in slavery to the fear of death, 16 (for doubtless it does not take hold of the messengers, but it does take hold of the seed of Abraham). 17 **For this cause He was obliged to become like His brothers in every way**, so that He could become a merciful and faithful High Priest in things toward God, to atone for the sins of the people. 18 For in what He suffered, having been tempted, He is able to help those being tempted.*

It is self-evident to Bible-believing Christians that pristine Christian monotheism as taught by Paul and verified by John portrayed Christ as first the preincarnate, only-begotten of the Father, the literal “Son of God” and thus of the same and equal “kind,” that He was literally and fully transformed into human flesh when He “emptied Himself” in the incarnation. Thus, pristine Christian monotheism (which included the preexistence of Christ and His complete transformation to humanity) was already well established in apostolic teaching and in the New Testament, even as Unitarian scholars admit.

In the next article we will examine the testimony of the earliest disciples of the Apostles, the pastors, apologists, and martyrs of the apostolic assemblies at the end of the apostolic age.

Part 3, The Apostolic Fathers

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