

The Evolution of God

6. The Intrusion of Greek Philosophy

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The intrusion of post-apostolic “divine revelation” allegedly from the “Paraclete” of Montanus had a radical effect on Christian theology concerning the nature of God, providing the groundwork for the acceptance of a third Person and the early formation of a subordinate “Trinity.” Yet, a second source of corruption from Greek philosophy began to creep in as well. This source had been first opposed by Paul (in his Epistles to the Corinthians),¹ and then by John in all of his works. The early apologists after the Apostles did their best to refute the errors of Gnosticism as the Apostles had done. Yet they were not entirely successful. Certain aspects of Greek thought, which were contrary to the Jewish thinking of Jesus and the Apostles, were not completely overthrown by them. As Christians interacted with the Greeks on an intellectual level, some of them unwittingly conceded certain foundational presuppositions of their opponents instead of boldly refuting them. These concessions had the greatest impact on two important aspects of pristine Christian monotheism: redefining the nature of the “Incarnation” and the abandonment of the “Subordination” principle.

“Kenosis,” the Transformation from Full Divinity to Full Humanity

The Apostles and earliest Christians did not believe in the concept of “incarnation” according to the Platonic model, that the divine Son of God merely added (clothed Himself with) human flesh. They instead believed in precisely the opposite, that He ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν (“self-emptied/voided”) the form of God and ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος (“in the form of men became”),² a complete ontological transformation in nature from divinity to humanity. That is ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο (“the Word **became** flesh”).³ The verb ἐκένωσεν (“e-ken-O-sen’ meaning emptied/voided) in Phil. 2:7 comes from the root word (adjective) κενός (kenos – empty/void). In noun form it is κένωσις (“Kenosis”). The term Kenosis and Kenotic doctrine have become the modern theological terms to describe the full transformation of the Son from divinity to humanity. That this doctrine is in direct opposition to the Roman Catholic (Platonic) doctrine of “incarnation” (adding flesh) is best illustrated by its anathematizing by Pope Pius XII.

¹ This was reflected in their denial of the resurrection

² Both of these Greek clauses are found in Phil. 2:7.

³ John 1:14

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*“There is another enemy of the faith of Chalcedon, widely diffused outside the fold of the Catholic religion. This is an opinion for which a rashly and falsely understood sentence of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians (ii, 7), supplies a basis and a shape. This is called the **kenotic doctrine**, and according to it, they imagine that **the divinity was taken away from the Word in Christ**. It is a wicked invention, equally to be condemned with the Docetism opposed to it. It reduces the whole mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption to empty the bloodless imaginations. ‘With the entire and perfect nature of man’ — thus grandly St. Leo the Great — ‘He Who was true God was born, complete in his own nature, complete in ours.’”⁴*

Yet the above Scriptures, as well as the entire second chapter of Hebrews stands in opposition to the Catholic doctrine of the incarnation, and in support of Kenosis.

2 Clement, written about the same time John wrote Revelation, is believed to be the oldest transcript of a Christian sermon outside the New Testament. It affirms the preexistence of Christ (Logos) as “Spirit” of God and His willing transmutation from full divinity to full humanity, exactly as both Paul⁵ and John indicated above.

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

The Unitarian scholar, Adolf Von Harnack, provided another similar very ancient Christian quote, affirming that Christians understood the incarnation to be a complete transformation of nature. *“**He has transformed Himself into a man** who comes to us to redeem us.”⁷* Of this earliest (post-Apostolic) period, Harnack concludes: *“For no one as yet thought of affirming two natures in Jesus. The divine dignity appeared ... as the metamorphosis of the Spirit.”⁸* Thus even this Unitarian scholar who was adamantly opposed to the Kenosis doctrine admitted that it was the earlier, and the Platonic doctrine of incarnation was a later development.

Ignatius of Antioch, a pupil of John’s, more than once described the incarnation as a complete transformation from divinity to humanity. For example: *“Look for Him who is*

⁴ Sempiternus Rex Christus, Ep. xxviii, 3. PL. Liv, 763. Cf. Serm. xxiii, 2. PL. lvi, 201

⁵ Cf. Phil. 2:5-8 & Heb. 2:5-18

⁶ 2 Clement, ch. ix

⁷ Harnack, Adolf, History of Dogma (Ed. Buchanan), Vol. I, p. 195, from Apoc. Sophon. Ed. Stern. 4 frag. P. 10

⁸ Harnack, Adolf, History of Dogma, Vol. 1, p. 194-5

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*above all time, eternal⁹ and invisible, yet who became visible for our sakes; impalpable¹⁰ and impassible,¹¹ yet who became passible on our account; and who in every kind of way suffered for our sakes.*¹² Thus the Son was formerly immortal, invisible, unable to be touched, incapable of pain, yet He became all of these things in the incarnation, a complete transformation.¹³

As was pointed out in the fourth article in this series, Justin's attempt to prove to Trypho the Jew that the Son of God became Son of Man was understood to mean that a complete transformation in nature had occurred from the God-kind to the human-kind, a concept that was absolutely contrary both to Platonic philosophy and the Greek philosophical concept that what is divine cannot be subject to ontological change.

“And Trypho said, “You endeavor to prove an incredible and well-nigh impossible thing; [namely], that God endured to be born and become man.”¹⁴

Irenaeus still maintained this concept as being apostolic doctrine in the last quarter of the second century.

“[B]ut following the only true and steadfast Teacher, the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself. For in no other way could we have learned the things of God, unless our Master, existing as the Word, had become man.¹⁵ For no other being had the power of revealing to us the things of the Father, except His own proper Word. ... [N]or did He truly redeem us by His own blood, if He did not really become man, restoring to His own handiwork what was said [of it] in the beginning, that man was made after the image and likeness of God; ... And for this reason it was that He graciously poured Himself out,¹⁶ that He might gather us into the bosom of the

⁹ Lit. “age-enduring” without reference to eternity prior to the 6 days of creation

¹⁰ “Impalpable” means unable to be felt by touch.

¹¹ “Impassible” means not capable of suffering, while “passible” means capable of suffering and death. This statement shows that Ignatius did not hold to hypostatic union (the Incarnation 2.0) which casts the Son of God as remaining a divine being while merely cloaking Himself in human flesh. Rather, Ignatius believed in the incarnation before it was polluted with Platonic philosophy, where the Son emptied Himself of His divine qualities in order to become completely human (Phil. 2:5-8). See the 6th article in this series for further discussion.

¹² Ignatius, Epistle to Polycarp, ch. iii

¹³ Those who teach hypostatic union (2 natures, the divine Son cloaked in a human body), claim that only Jesus' assumed body was capable of these things while at the same time the divine Son of God did not.

¹⁴ Ch. lxxviii

¹⁵ John 1:14

¹⁶ Phil. 2:7

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*Father. ... For blood can only come from veins and flesh, and whatsoever else makes up **the substance of man, such as the Word of God was actually made.**"¹⁷*

Here Irenaeus supported his claims of complete transformation of the Son using both of the critical passages cited previously (Philippians 2:5-8 & John 1:14). John wrote that *"the Word became flesh and dwelled among us,"*¹⁸ which Irenaeus interpreted as *"our Master, existing as the Word, had become man"* and *"the substance of man, such as the Word of God was actually made."* Paul wrote that Christ, being formerly in the form of God chose to *"empty Himself"*¹⁹ to become man, which Irenaeus interpreted as *"He graciously poured Himself out."* Irenaeus viewed this willing and complete transformation as Christ's greatest sacrifice of love. Such statements indicate a total ontological transformation from the divine nature to human nature – *"following the only true and steadfast Teacher, the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself."*

Irenaeus pointed out that the common denominator in all of the Gnostic heresies was the denial that the divine preexistent Word was actually transformed into human flesh.

*"But according to the opinion of not one of the heretics was **the Word of God made flesh.** For if any one carefully examines the systems of them all, he will find that the Word of God is brought in by all of them as not having become incarnate (sine carne – without flesh) and impassible, as is also the Christ from above. ... Therefore the Lord's disciple, pointing them all out as false witnesses, says, 'And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us'."²⁰*

Celsus' Refutation of Kenosis on Greek Philosophical Grounds:

In contemporary Greek philosophical thinking, there was a debate among the followers of Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, and others concerning the nature of the creation in general and matter in particular. One primary question was whether the material creation always existed or whether it had a beginning, and whether the underlying matter was eternal. The Stoics claimed that matter, the raw material of the universe, always existed and was eternal. Plato, and the Gnostics who followed his philosophy, disagreed, claiming that matter itself was defiled and was created by a defective god. The debate turned on the concept of "change" and "motion." Since the physical universe and everything in it is obviously subject to motion and thus change and decay, it was argued that it must have

¹⁷ Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. V, ch. pref. – ii:2

¹⁸ John 1:14

¹⁹ Phil. 2:6

²⁰ Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. III, ch. xi:3

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a beginning, and that everything changeable necessarily has a beginning and thus cannot be eternal. It was agreed by all sides that the supreme good, God, was eternal and thus incapable of change. It was because of this presupposition and axiom that the Kenosis doctrine was doomed from the outset in the Greek mind.

About AD 175, Celsus, a Greek philosopher, sought to overthrow Christianity based in part on Greek philosophical principles. In his book, titled, *“The True Logos,”* Celsus took exception to the cornerstone of the Christian Faith, the Kenosis doctrine, that the divine Son of God had become fully transformed in His ontological nature to a human being. For Celsus, a fundamental transformation of what is divine (and thus unchangeable) contradicted the universally accepted principle of Greek philosophy. What is truly eternal – God – is **incapable of change**. If He was the epitome of perfection, any “change” would necessarily be for the worse. And if change was possible, then He could not be the epitome of perfection and goodness in the first place, nor could He be eternal. Celsus’ apparently unanswerable argument against Kenosis went as follows according to Origen:

*“God is good, and beautiful, and blessed, and that in the best and most beautiful degree. But if he come down among men, **he must undergo a change**, and a change from good to evil, from virtue to vice, from happiness to misery, and from best to worst. Who, then, would make choice of such a change? It is the nature of a mortal, indeed, to undergo change and remolding, **but of an immortal to remain the same and unaltered. God, then, could not admit of such a change.**”²¹*

Thus, according to Celsus, if the preincarnate Son was really begotten out of God, of the same kind and nature as God Himself as the earliest Christians universally claimed, He would necessarily be incapable of change to full humanity. If the Son had the nature of God, He could not be transformed into the nature of Man. This was Celsus’ primary premise for rejecting the doctrine of the Son’s Kenosis. Origen continues quoting Celsus:

*“But Celsus, ... proceeds, accordingly, as follows: ‘**God either really changes himself, AS THESE [Christians] ASSERT, into a mortal body, and the impossibility of that has been already declared;** or else he does not undergo a change, but only causes the beholders to imagine so, and thus deceives them, and is guilty of falsehood.’”²²*

Note that Celsus offered only two possible options regarding the Christian claim of how the Word became flesh, both of which presupposed that all Christians believed that the divine Son of God was **fully transformed** into a Man, thus undergoing real change in His

²¹ Origen, Against Celsus, Bk. IV, ch. xiv

²² Origen, Against Celsus, Bk. IV, ch. xviii

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ontological nature. Celsus considered this idea impossible and foolish. The only other option in keeping with his Greek philosophical axiom was that the Divine Son of God only pretended to become flesh. If so, He was a deceiver. There was no other alternative for Christians in Celsus' thinking, that is if the Greek axiom was maintained.

Celsus was obviously not aware of any Christians who taught anything other than **the real and complete transmutation of the divine Son of God into full humanity as Son of Man** otherwise his argument could have easily been overturned. That the Christian view of Kenosis was theoretically impossible in this Greek philosophical world-view shows that the original Kenotic doctrine was definitely not driven by syncretism with Greek philosophy, **but was fundamentally opposed to it.**²³

The real problem, however, was not with the apostolic doctrine of Kenosis, but with the faulty Greek philosophical presupposition which Celsus assumed. Whether the nature of God's Son, begotten and of like "kind" with His Father, was immutable or not cannot be deduced from philosophy or by observing the world around us (the real basis of Greek philosophy), since God is not a part of the creation so His ontological nature cannot be deduced from observing nature. The truth is to be found in what Scripture reveals about God, not what human reason and observation of the creation suggests.²⁴ But since the Greeks did not view God as outside of creation (they viewed Him as confined within it and subject to its natural laws), and since they were not inclined to accept Scripture, such a claim could not gain any traction in their intellectual circles. Consequently, well-meaning, but misguided, Christians simply sought a new way to redefine the incarnation that would be acceptable to the Greek philosophical world-view.

The Incarnation – Full Divinity Cloaked in a Human Body:

Melito of Sardis, also known as Melito the philosopher, was a Christian contemporary of Celsus and was also trained in Greek philosophy. He immediately recognized the

²³ Unitarians claim that the doctrine of the incarnation was of Platonic origin. But that is only true of the modified version – the "Incarnation 2.0" – not the earlier version.

²⁴ Some modern Trinitarians who hold the Catholic doctrine of "Hypostatic Union" (2 natures held simultaneously) point to Mal. 3:6 "*For I am the LORD, I do not change*" and Heb. 13:8 "*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever,*" as proof-texts for this principle. Yet, it is clear from the context of Malachi that God was speaking of His faithfulness to His covenants not about the possibility of change for His impersonal attributes. Likewise, the argument from Hebrews is futile, since Jesus obviously "changed" as He grew from an infant, died, was resurrected, etc. Plus this passage refers to Christ after the incarnation exclusively. Again, the point stressed is not about an impersonal "nature" but about character and faithfulness to keep covenants. See the following passages which provide the concept alluded to in these two passages: Num. 23:19; Deut. 7:9; 1 Kings 23:24; 2 Chron. 6:14; Neh. 1:5; Neh. 9:32; Dan. 9:4.

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problem introduced by Celsus and set out to solve it, to make Christianity acceptable within Greek thought. He accepted Celsus' premise, that what is truly good and divine – God – is incapable of change. So, if the Word, the divine Son of God, cannot change in His ontological nature, then He must not have really changed at all. He merely added flesh, that is cloaked Himself in a body of flesh. The Platonic concept of the body being the temporary "prison" of an immortal soul provided the perfect solution for Melito. According to Plato, the body of flesh is not essential to a person's nature or existence, but the person exists as "spirit" before conception and continues to exist after death as "spirit," and is even reincarnated into other bodies. Thus the Platonic model, and "incarnation," became the vehicle to escape Celsus' apparent overthrow of the biblical doctrine of Kenosis. The divine Son of God, as "Spirit" with an immutable divine nature, temporarily ADDED human flesh to His Person as a garment, without diminishing in any way His divine nature underneath. Here is Melito's Platonic solution in his own words:

"On these accounts He came to us; on these accounts, though He was incorporeal, He formed for Himself a body after our fashion, — appearing as a sheep, yet still remaining the Shepherd; being esteemed a servant, yet not renouncing the Sonship; being carried in the womb of Mary, yet arrayed in the nature of His Father; treading upon the earth, yet filling heaven; appearing as an infant, yet not discarding the eternity of His nature; being invested with a body, yet not circumscribing the unmixed simplicity of His Godhead; being esteemed poor, yet not divested of His riches; needing sustenance inasmuch as He was man, yet not ceasing to feed the entire world inasmuch as He is God; putting on the likeness of a servant, yet not impairing the likeness of His Father. He sustained every character belonging to Him in an immutable nature: He was standing before Pilate, and at the same time was sitting with His Father; He was nailed upon the tree, and yet was the Lord of all things."²⁵

The underlined portion above betrays a radical departure in the interpretation of Philippians 2:5-8. Irenaeus stated clearly that Christ "*poured Himself out.*" But that will not work against the argument of Celsus. So Melito says no, He did not really "*empty Himself*" (being diminished in nature) but rather just the opposite, He added humanity as an accessory while retaining all that He was initially. Thus, in the newly-devised "Incarnation," the Word did not really "become flesh." He temporarily borrowed flesh. Nothing of His nature was diminished; nothing at all was sacrificed in the "incarnation."²⁶ Please note that this is precisely the opposite of the meaning of "self-emptied" (kenosis).

²⁵ Melito the Philosopher, III

²⁶ The editor of Ignatius' epistles held the same view which is not to be found in Ignatius original works. Compare the short and long version of Ignatius' epistle to the Trallians, ch. x.

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In contrasting the Incarnation according to Melito with the Kenosis according to Irenaeus, one thing stands out as a supreme casualty of this compromise with Platonism: The new replacement of Kenosis with the Incarnation means that it is no longer the ultimate act of love either on the part of Christ or of God. There was no actual sacrifice. John's statement that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son ..." is no real act of love if only a temporary flesh-suit was given for our salvation. Nor did Christ Himself give up anything at all to become flesh on our account. Paul's statement that He "emptied Himself" becomes itself "empty" of any real meaning.

Tertullian followed Melito's solution also when dealing with a similar argument of Hermogenes. At first Tertullian admitted (correctly) that the presupposition itself (on which Celsus and Hermogenes based their argument) may be wrong. But then he conceded the point, and argued in favor of Melito's solution, taking the path of least resistance.

"But bear in mind that matter has once for all been determined to be eternal, as being unmade, unborn, and therefore supposedly of an unchangeable and incorruptible nature; and this from the very opinion of Hermogenes himself, which he alleges against us when he denies that God was able to make (anything) of Himself, on the ground that what is eternal is incapable of change, because it would lose — so the opinion runs — what it once was, in becoming by the change that which it was not, if it were not eternal. But as for the Lord, who is also eternal, (he maintained) that He could not be anything else than what He always is. Well, then, I will adopt this definite opinion of his, and by means thereof refute him. I blame matter with a like censure, because out of it, evil though it be — nay, very evil — good things have been created, nay, "very good" ones: "And God saw that they were good, and God blessed them" — because, of course, of their very great goodness; certainly not because they were evil, or very evil. Change is therefore admissible in matter; and this being the case, it has lost its condition of eternity; in short, its beauty is decayed in death. Eternity, however, cannot be lost, because it cannot be eternity except by reason of its immunity from loss. For the same reason also it is incapable of change, inasmuch as, since it is eternity, it can by no means be changed."²⁷

"Without doubt, the nature of things which are subject to change is regulated by this law, that they have no permanence in the state which is undergoing change in them, and that they come to an end from thus wanting permanence, whilst they lose that in the process of change which they previously were."²⁸

²⁷ Tertullian, Against Hermogenes, ch. xii

²⁸ Tertullian, On the Flesh of Christ, ch. III

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While admitting the “change” principle applied to nature, therefore physical matter cannot be eternal, Tertullian first (correctly) argued that this principle does not apply to God Himself who is not part of the creation (contrary to contemporary Greek thinking).

“But nothing is equal with God; His nature is different from the condition of all things. If, then, the things which differ from God, and from which God differs, lose what existence they had whilst they are undergoing change, wherein will consist the difference of the Divine Being from all other things except in His possessing the contrary faculty of theirs, — in other words, that God can be changed into all conditions, and yet continue just as He is? On any other supposition, He would be on the same level with those things which, when changed, lose the existence they had before.”²⁹

However, apparently in an attempt to choose the easier path to defending Christianity within the Greek culture, Tertullian conceded, taking up the solution provided previously by Melito, that when the Son of God became Man He did not lose anything of His previous existence, nor was He diminished in any way.

*“You have sometimes read and believed that the Creator’s angels have been changed into human form, and have even borne about so veritable a body, that Abraham even washed their feet, and Lot was rescued from the Sodomites by their hands; an angel, moreover, wrestled with a man so strenuously with his body, that the latter desired to be let loose, so tightly was he held. Has it, then, been permitted to angels, which are inferior to God, after they have been changed into human bodily form, nevertheless to remain angels? And will you deprive God, their superior, of this faculty, as if **Christ could not continue to be God after His real assumption of the nature of man**? Or else, did those angels appear as phantoms of flesh? You will not, however, have the courage to say this; for if it be so held in your belief, that the Creator’s angels are in the same condition as Christ, then Christ will belong to the same God as those angels do, who are like Christ in their condition. If you had not purposely rejected in some instances, and corrupted in others, the Scriptures which are opposed to your opinion, you would have been confuted in this matter by the Gospel of John, when it declares that the Spirit descended in the body of a dove, and sat upon the Lord. When the said Spirit was in this condition, He was as truly a dove as He was also a spirit; **nor did He destroy His own proper substance by the assumption of an extraneous substance**. But you ask what becomes of the dove’s body, after the return of the Spirit back to heaven, and similarly in the case of the angels. **Their withdrawal was effected in the same manner as their appearance had been. If you had seen how their production out of nothing had been effected, you would have***

²⁹ ibid

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known also the process of their return to nothing. If the initial step was out of sight, so was also the final one. Still there was solidity in their bodily substance, whatever may have been the force by which the body became visible. What is written cannot but have been."³⁰

The careful reader should notice that in this last paragraph Tertullian was making a major concession to Greek presuppositions which borders on Gnosticism. By citing these examples in order to explain the Kenosis as Incarnation, he was actually implying that Christ's humanity was only a temporary condition of His assuming flesh, while in reality underneath the human exterior He remained unchanged regarding what He actually was. Furthermore, by using this argument, Tertullian was implying that in the ascension Christ's human form and nature vanished into nothing as He shed this temporary shell. This was in direct opposition to John's statement that Logos "*became flesh*"³¹ (not borrowed flesh), and Paul's statement that Christ was formerly "*in the form of God*" but then "*emptied Himself*" in order to come "*in the likeness of men*,"³² and that "*in all things He had to be made like His brethren*,"³³ and John's statement that Jesus Christ "*has come [perfect tense]*"³⁴ *in the flesh*,"³⁵ and Peter's statement that the same "flesh" from the seed of David must sit upon the Throne of David in order to fulfill the Davidic Covenant.³⁶ Finally, many Scriptures refer to the second coming of Christ as the coming of the "Son of Man," indicating His full humanity at the time of His return. At His ascension in the flesh, the angels said "*this same Jesus*" would come again in like manner.³⁷

Again, in his later work, *Against Praxaeus*, Tertullian completely abandoned his former claim that the "change" presupposition does not apply to God's own nature. He cast his lot in with Melito. It is abundantly clear that the radical redefinition from Kenosis to Incarnation was conceived as a defense against the philosophical point raised first by Celsus against Christianity, that the divine nature if it is eternal must be incapable of change, making Kenosis impossible. In his later writings, Tertullian fully embraced the Platonic Incarnation teaching.

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ John 1:14

³² Phil. 2:5-8

³³ Heb. 2:17

³⁴ The perfect tense requires that Jesus Christ must still be "in the flesh" when John wrote this decades after Jesus' ascension.

³⁵ 1 John 4:2-3

³⁶ Acts 2:30

³⁷ Acts 1:11

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“The Word, therefore, is incarnate; and this must be the point of our inquiry: How the Word became flesh, — whether it was by having been transfigured, as it were, in the flesh [Kenosis], or by having really clothed Himself in flesh. Certainly it was by a real clothing of Himself in flesh. For the rest, we must needs believe God to be unchangeable, and incapable of form, as being eternal. But transfiguration is the destruction of that which previously existed. For whatsoever is transfigured into some other thing ceases to be that which it had been, and begins to be that which it previously was not. God, however, neither ceases to be what He was, nor can He be any other thing than what He is.”

Tertullian here dismissed what had been previously taught regarding the transformation of the Son of God to Son of Man on the same philosophical grounds Celsus had raised against Christianity, that the divine nature is incapable of change. Therefore, the divine Word could not literally “become flesh” by change of essence. He then addressed another possibility, whether the divine nature could mix with human nature, forming a third kind of mixed nature:

“The Word is God, and “the Word of the Lord remaineth forever,” — even by holding on unchangeably in His own proper form. Now, if He admits not of being transfigured, it must follow that He be understood in this sense to have become flesh, when He comes to be in the flesh, and is manifested, and is seen, and is handled by means of the flesh; since all the other points likewise require to be thus understood. For if the Word became flesh by a transfiguration and change of substance, it follows at once that Jesus must be a substance compounded of two substances — of flesh and spirit, — a kind of mixture, like electrum, composed of gold and silver; and it begins to be neither gold (that is to say, spirit) nor silver (that is to say, flesh), — the one being changed by the other, and a third substance produced. Jesus, therefore, cannot at this rate be God for He has ceased to be the Word, which was made flesh; nor can He be Man incarnate for He is not properly flesh, and it was flesh which the Word became. Being compounded, therefore, of both, He actually is neither; He is rather some third substance, very different from either.”

Having ruled out these two possibilities in his own mind, Tertullian then presented the same argument as Melito, reinterpreting the Kenosis as “Incarnation” in the mold of Platonism.

“But the truth is, we find that He is expressly set forth as both God and Man; the very psalm which we have quoted intimating (of the flesh), that “God became Man in the midst of it, He therefore established it by the will of the Father,” — certainly in all respects as the Son of God and the Son of Man, being God and Man, differing no doubt according to each substance in its own especial property, inasmuch as the Word is nothing else

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but God, and the flesh nothing else but Man. Thus does the apostle also teach respecting His two substances, saying, “who was made of the seed of David;” in which words He will be Man and Son of Man. “Who was declared to be the Son of God, according to the Spirit;” in which words He will be God, and the Word — the Son of God. **We see plainly the twofold state, which is not confounded, but conjoined in One Person — Jesus, God and Man.** Concerning Christ, indeed, I defer what I have to say. (I remark here), that the property of each nature is so wholly preserved, that the Spirit on the one hand did all things in Jesus suitable to Itself, such as miracles, and mighty deeds, and wonders; and the Flesh, on the other hand, exhibited the affections which belong to it. It was hungry under the devil’s temptation, thirsty with the Samaritan woman, wept over Lazarus, was troubled even unto death, and at last actually died. If, however, it was only a tertium quid, some composite essence formed out of the Two substances, like the electrum (which we have mentioned), there would be no distinct proofs apparent of either nature. But by a transfer of functions, the Spirit would have done things to be done by the Flesh, and the Flesh such as are effected by the Spirit; or else such things as are suited neither to the Flesh nor to the Spirit, but confusedly of some third character. **Nay more, on this supposition, either the Word underwent death, or the flesh did not die, if so be the Word was converted into flesh; because either the flesh was immortal, or the Word was mortal. Forasmuch, however, as the two substances acted distinctly, each in its own character, there necessarily accrued to them severally their own operations, and their own issues.** Learn then, together with Nicodemus, that “that which is born in the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit.” Neither the flesh becomes Spirit, nor the Spirit flesh. In one Person they no doubt are well able to be co-existent. Of them Jesus consists — Man. of the flesh; of the Spirit, God — and the angel designated Him as “the Son of God,” in respect of that nature, in which He was Spirit, reserving for the flesh the appellation “Son of Man.” In like manner, again, the apostle calls Him “the Mediator between God and Men,” and so affirmed His participation of both substances. Now, to end the matter, will you, who interpret the Son of God to be flesh, be so good as to show us what the Son of Man is? Will He then, I want to know, be the Spirit? But you insist upon it that the Father Himself is the Spirit, on the ground that “God is a Spirit,” just as if we did not read also that there is “the Spirit of God;” in the same manner as we find that as “the Word was God,” so also there is “the Word of God.”³⁸

Note the corner into which Tertullian has painted himself by this interpretation: The Logos, who was allegedly incapable of change, incapable of suffering, and incapable of death, remained alive on the cross and in the tomb while only the flesh experienced change, suffering, and death. **Therefore, the Son of God did not actually die. The Son of Man died.** Tertullian has given enormous ground to Gnosticism, especially that of the

³⁸ Tertullian, Against Praxaes, ch. xxvii

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Nicolaitans and Cerinthus, by making Christ effectively two distinct persons! This unsolvable tension of mutually exclusive ideas persisted within Trinitarianism for centuries leading to illogical creeds and countless divisions over the nature of Christ. This problem has not been solved by such creeds, only disguised. The same paradox remains to this very day within Trinitarianism, disguised as a “divine mystery.”

In Novatian’s work on the Trinity, he also repeated the same argument of Melito, that the Son possessed two natures at the same time. Notice his Platonic dualism and how this was used to explain the alleged two natures.

*“For who cannot understand that the divinity is impassable, although the human weakness is liable to suffering? When, therefore, Christ is understood to be mingled and associated as well of that which God is, as of that which man is — for “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt in us” — who cannot easily apprehend of himself, without any teacher and interpreter, that **it was not that in Christ that died which is God, but that in Him died which is man? For what if the divinity in Christ does not die, but the substance of the flesh only is destroyed**, when in other men also, who are not flesh only, but flesh and soul, the flesh indeed alone suffers the inroads of wasting and death, while **the soul is seen to be uncorrupted, and beyond the laws of destruction and death?** For this also our Lord Himself said, exhorting us to martyrdom and to contempt of all human power: “Fear not those who slay the body, but cannot kill the soul.” **But if the immortal soul cannot be killed or slain in any other, although the body and flesh by itself can be slain, how much rather assuredly could not the Word of God and God in Christ be put to death at all, although the flesh alone and the body was slain! For if in any man whatever, the soul has this excellence of immortality that it cannot be slain, much more has the nobility of the Word of God this power of not being slain.** ... So that, while from these considerations it is gathered that nothing but the human nature in Christ was put to death, it appears that **the Word in Him was not drawn down into mortality.**”³⁹*

Thus, the new “Incarnation” doctrine only works within a Platonic model of what a man is, and only works if we presuppose Plato’s “immortality of the soul” doctrine.

Yet, despite the radical revision of Kenosis, Novatian’s “Trinity” was still of the hierarchical or subordinate kind since Novatian continued to teach that God preceded His Son in time, since the Son was “begotten” as an act of God’s will.

³⁹ Novatian, On the Trinity, ch. xxv

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“He is born of that Father who alone has no beginning. He, then, when the Father willed it, proceeded from the Father, and He who was in the Father came forth from the Father; and He who was in the Father because He was of the Father, was subsequently with the Father, because He came forth from the Father, — that is to say, that divine substance whose name is the Word, whereby all things were made, and without whom nothing was made. For all things are after Him, because they are by Him. And reasonably, He is before all things, but after the Father, since all things were made by Him, and He proceeded from Him of whose will all things were made. Assuredly God proceeding from God, causing a person second to the Father as being the Son.”⁴⁰

Finally, to Origen falls the task of summing up and directly refuting Celsus by name. He does this by absolutely mutilating Paul’s statements in Philippians 2, and fully adopting the Platonic Christ, a divine Spirit-Person disguised in a prison of flesh.

“And with respect to His having descended among men, He was “previously in the form of God;” and through benevolence, divested Himself (of His glory), that He might be capable of being received by men. But He did not, I imagine, undergo any change from “good to evil,” for “He did no sin;” nor from “virtue to vice,” for “He knew no sin.” Nor did He pass from “happiness to misery,” but He humbled Himself, and nevertheless was blessed, even when His humiliation was undergone in order to benefit our race. Nor was there any change in Him from “best to worst,” for how can goodness and benevolence be of “the worst?” ... But if the immortal God — the Word — by assuming a mortal body and a human soul, appears to Celsus to undergo a change and transformation, let him learn that the Word, still remaining essentially the Word, suffers none of those things which are suffered by the body or the soul; but, condescending occasionally to (the weakness of) him who is unable to look upon the splendors and brilliancy of Deity, He becomes as it were flesh, speaking with a literal voice, until he who has received Him in such a form is able, through being elevated in some slight degree by the teaching of the Word, to gaze upon what is, so to speak, His real and preeminent appearance.”⁴¹

As with Tertullian and Novatian, according to Origen the real Son of God did not suffer or die. He then argues that Jesus revealed His true (hidden) nature to His disciples in the Transfiguration.⁴²

⁴⁰ Novatian, On the Trinity, ch. xxxi

⁴¹ Origen, Against Celsus, Against Celsus, Bk. IV, ch. 16-17

⁴² The Transfiguration was not a revealing of what Christ really was at the time, but was a vision of the future, Christ (along with Moses and Elijah) resurrected and glorified in the Kingdom, as Peter explained in 2 Pet. 1:13-21.

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*“... And hence it is not the case, as Celsus and those like him would have it, that our God was transformed, and ascending the lofty mountain, showed that His real appearance was something different, and far more excellent than what those who remained below, and were unable to follow Him on high, beheld. For those below did not possess eyes capable of seeing the transformation of the Word into His glorious and more divine condition. But with difficulty were they able to receive Him as He was; so that it might be said of Him by those who were unable to behold His more excellent nature: ‘We saw Him, and He had no form nor comeliness; but His form was mean, and inferior to that of the sons of men.’ And let these remarks be an answer to the suppositions of Celsus, **who does not understand the changes or transformations of Jesus, as related in the histories, nor His mortal and immortal nature.**”⁴³*

To this day Trinitarians use the same argument, that the Transfiguration pulled back the veil to show Jesus’ alleged full divinity cloaked in flesh. Yet, Jesus Himself said this was a “vision,”⁴⁴ and Peter, when recalling this event, stated plainly that the vision they saw was the glorified Christ in His coming and Kingdom.⁴⁵ This is why Moses and Elijah were also seen as having been resurrected in the Kingdom as well.

Origen then clearly demonstrated that the Incarnation was in the image of Platonic dualism.

*“But if one were to take the change as referring to **the soul of Jesus after it had entered the body**, we would inquire in what sense the term “change” is used. **For if it be meant to apply to its essence, such a supposition is inadmissible**, not only in relation to the soul of Jesus, but also to the rational soul of any other being. And if it be alleged that it suffers anything from the body when united with it, or from the place to which it has come, then what inconvenience can happen to the Word who, in great benevolence, brought down a Savior to the human race? — seeing none of those who formerly professed to effect a cure could accomplish so much as that soul showed it could do, by what it performed, even by voluntarily descending to the level of human destinies for the benefit of our race. And the Divine Word, well knowing this, speaks to that effect in many passages of Scripture, although it is sufficient at present to quote one testimony of Paul to the following effect: **‘Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus; who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no***

⁴³ Origen, Against Celsus, ch. xvi

⁴⁴ Matt. 17:9

⁴⁵ 2 Peter 1:16-19 Peter said that they had observed on the Holy Mountain was “the power and coming” of Christ. The word “coming” is παρουσία which always refers to Christ’s second coming in great power and glory (Matt. 24:3,27,37,39; 1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess. 2:19; 1 Thess. 3:13; 1 Thess. 4:15; 1 Thess. 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:1,8-9; James 5:7-8; 2 Pet. 3:4,12; 1 John 2:28).

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reputation [lit. “emptied Himself”], and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name.”

This Platonic Incarnation of the coexistence of two natures in Jesus Christ eventually came to be called “Hypostatic Union,” and became Roman Catholic dogma and an integral part of the Trinity codified in the creeds centuries later. Yet it should be observed that the original doctrine of Kenosis had nothing in common with Platonic dualism and was irreconcilable with the Greek philosophical principle concerning change and the nature of God. Thus, those who reject the preexistence of the Son of God on the grounds that the doctrine of the Incarnation owes its origin to syncretism with Greek philosophy are shown to have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. The original doctrine of Kenosis, which requires the preexistence of the Son of God, owes its origin to the teachings of the Apostles found in the New Testament and is incompatible with Platonism. However, the development of the “Incarnation” in the latter half of the second century is a radical modification based on syncretism with Platonism. It in effect repackages the Gnostic presuppositions of Celsus and the Nicolaitans whom John opposed.

The Demise of Subordination:

The earliest Christian writers clearly acknowledged a priority of Persons in the Godhead, the Father being the only one who is eternal, self-sufficient, and the source of everything including the Son of God whom He begat from His own being. They understood Solomon’s riddle concerning “Wisdom” in Proverbs 8 as referring to the only-begotten Son of God, “begotten” by God at the beginning of creation. They understood “Logos” of John 1 as this same Person, subject entirely to the Father who begat Him. He had a beginning of His Person, but not of His ontological substance which was out of God. Even Tertullian, both before and after his conversion to Montanism, argued strongly for this hierarchy and the origin of the Son as distinct from the Father when He was “begotten.” Tertullian stated plainly that there was a time, before creation, when God was not a “Father” because the Son did not yet exist as a distinct Person.

*“Because God is in like manner a Father, and He is also a Judge; but He has not always been Father and Judge, merely on the ground of His having always been God. **For He could not have been the Father previous to the Son, nor a Judge previous to sin. There was, however, a time when neither sin existed with Him, nor the Son;** the former of which was to constitute the Lord a Judge, and the latter a Father. In this way He was not Lord*

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*previous to those things of which He was to be the Lord. But He was only to become Lord at some future time: just as **He became the Father by the Son**, and a Judge by sin, so also did He become Lord by means of those things which He had made, in order that they might serve Him.”⁴⁶*

This was a necessary inference from the fact that the Son was “begotten” at the beginning of creation as an act of God, on the day called “Today.”⁴⁷ At the same time, the early Christians also claimed that the essence of “Word” and “Wisdom” (as abstract components of God’s nature) were always part of who God is. Thus, it was the distinct Person to whom both titles were applied, who had an origin when He was “begotten” out of God as God’s Son of the same “kind” as God Himself.

That only one Person, God the Father, is eternal, unbegotten, uncreated, being the sole source for everything (including His Son) and is therefore the sole Sovereign, was the early Christian defense against those who claimed that Christians preached polytheism. Thus, all of these writers were true “monotheists” because they understood the term “God” to mean the sole Sovereign over all. Even after Tertullian’s introduction of a third Person the hierarchy was still maintained since the Spirit was allegedly subject to the Son who was subject to the Father. Sole sovereignty was maintained which is the core of the “one God” statements in Scripture. However, Tertullian and his Trinitarian followers seem not to have grappled with the problem that arises from this: **If the Son’s beginning as a distinct Person from the Father was due to the act of “begetting,” what act or event caused a third Person to become distinct from the Father?** These early Trinitarians had no answer for this and it is still a paradox for Trinitarians today.

Yet this problem appears to be part of Origen’s motivation in overthrowing the subordination principle. Origen laid the groundwork for the later Trinitarian evolution, the claim that the Son and Spirit were the Father’s peers, His equals rather than His subordinates. Thus, the Trinity as three co-equal and co-eternal Persons, first envisioned by Origen, is actually necessitated by the problem created by adding a Third Person who has no known origin or beginning.

Origen’s device for removing priority and subordination within the Godhead was indeed clever. He argued from the titles assigned to the preincarnate Son in Scripture – “Wisdom” and “Word.” Rather than viewing “Wisdom” (from Prov. 8) and “Word” (from John 1) as being **descriptive proper names for God’s divine Son** as the previous writers did, Origen argued that the Son was “wisdom” itself and “word” (logos-reason)

⁴⁶ Tertullian, Against Hermogenes, ch. iii

⁴⁷ Psalm 2:7 No “days” existed prior to “day one” of Moses’ creation account (Gen. 1:5).

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itself as though these were substances rather than abstract concepts. Since God cannot be said to ever have lacked either “wisdom” or “reason,” these things (substances) must have always existed within the Father. And if the Son of God was “Wisdom” and “Word,” by necessity He must have always existed with the Father **as a distinct Person**.

*“And who that is capable of entertaining reverential thoughts or feelings regarding God, can suppose or believe that God the Father ever existed, even for a moment of time, without having generated this Wisdom? For in that case he must say either that God was unable to generate Wisdom before He produced her, so that He afterwards called into being her who formerly did not exist, or that He possessed the power indeed, but — what cannot be said of God without impiety — was unwilling to use it; both of which suppositions, it is patent to all, are alike absurd and impious: for they amount to this, either that God advanced from a condition of inability to one of ability, or that, although possessed of the power, He concealed it, and delayed the generation of Wisdom. Wherefore we have always held that God is the Father of His only-begotten Son, who was born indeed of Him, and derives from Him what He is, **but without any beginning**, not only such as may be measured by any divisions of time, but even that which the mind alone can contemplate within itself, or behold, so to speak, with the naked powers of the understanding. **And therefore we must believe that Wisdom was generated before any beginning that can be either comprehended or expressed.**”⁴⁸*

Origen proposed the idea that the Father and Son always existed together. Origen was not much of a biblical exegete, but rather a philosopher. So his arguments were rooted in philosophical speculations rather than exegesis of the text of Scripture. In Origen’s writings we have the seed that would create the paradox that haunts Christianity to this very day: How can three Persons, equal in every way, yet each possessing an independent mind and will, be counted as “one God?” Such a concept utterly destroys all pretense of monotheism.

But the difficulty created with harmonizing the Trinity with monotheism was not the only problem. Origen’s making the Son co-eternal by inventing the idea of “eternal generation” introduced its own absurdity and conflict with earlier writers. How can the clause regarding the Son in Psalm 2, “**Today** I have begotten You,” refer to an eternal state of being? The verb “begotten” is an action verb, referring to an event. How can it suddenly be considered a state-of-being verb without any action or event of separation or procreation from the Father? And how can “Today,” a finite period of time, refer to all eternity past? Origen tried to defend his position by philosophical speculation about the nature of time itself which is beyond human comprehension. Yet, since God chose to

⁴⁸ Origen, De Principis, ch. ii

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reveal Himself and His Son in human familial terms, using verbs like “begotten” (which in human language can have only one meaning), Origen abandoned Scripture and the normal meaning of words.

Origen also eliminated the subordination of Tertullian’s third Person.

*“We are not, however, to suppose that the Spirit derives His knowledge through revelation from the Son. For if the Holy Spirit knows the Father through the Son’s revelation, He passes from a state of ignorance into one of knowledge; but it is alike impious and foolish to confess the Holy Spirit, and yet to ascribe to Him ignorance. For even although something else existed before the Holy Spirit, it was not by progressive advancement that He came to be the Holy Spirit; as if anyone should venture to say, that at the time when He was not yet the Holy Spirit He was ignorant of the Father, but that after He had received knowledge He was made the Holy Spirit. For if this were the case, the Holy Spirit would never be reckoned in the Unity of the Trinity, i.e., along with the unchangeable Father and His Son, **unless He had always been the Holy Spirit**. When we use, indeed, such terms as “always” or “was,” or any other designation of time, they are not to be taken absolutely, but with due allowance; for while the significations of these words relate to time, and those subjects of which we speak are spoken of by a stretch of language as existing in time, they nevertheless surpass in their real nature all conception of the finite understanding.”⁴⁹*

Origen was held in extremely high regard for his philosophical mind by Christians with an affinity for Greek philosophy. On the other hand, he was denounced as a heretic by many others who followed Paul’s admonition considering avoiding Greek philosophy.⁵⁰

In the Roman assembly, Tertullian’s version of subordinate Trinitarianism seems to have prevailed up until the time of Constantine, with the Son having a beginning of His existence as a distinct conscious Person and subordinate to the Father, plus the Platonic Incarnation and two natures introduced first by Melito. We see the same teaching in the works of Hippolytus of Rome.

In the Alexandrian assembly, Origen’s rejection of subordination (making the three persons co-equal in authority and eternity) became dominant. Origen proposed the philosophical, yet illogical, idea of “eternal generation” of the Son, always existed along with the Father on an equal footing. By assuming the same arguments for the Spirit, Origen essentially invented what would later become official Roman Catholic dogma, a Trinity of three co-equal and co-eternal Persons.

⁴⁹ Origen, De Principis, ch. iii

⁵⁰ Col. 2:8

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Gregory Thaumaturgus was pastor of the assembly at Alexandria from around AD 240-265, and a devout follower of Origen's school. Gregory articulated Origen's view succinctly.

“There is a perfect Trinity, in glory and eternity and sovereignty, neither divided nor estranged. Wherefore there is nothing either created or in servitude in the Trinity; nor anything superinduced, as if at some former period it was non-existent, and at some later period it was introduced. And thus neither was the Son ever wanting to the Father, nor the Spirit to the Son; but without variation and without change, the same Trinity abideth ever.”⁵¹

This view is held today by Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Protestants, and most Evangelicals. Yet, as is proven by our survey of the previous writers, it was not the view held in the early years at the close of the apostolic age. It is the result of a fairly radical evolution of theology, driven by two primary external influences: (a) alleged further divine revelation (primarily through Montanism) of a third Divine Person, and (b) philosophical syncretism (primarily through Melito, Tertullian, Novatian, and Origen). These two external influences had mixed success in different locations in altering the earliest verifiable view of the Godhead among Christians.

As we approach the time of Constantine, the Christian assemblies (excluding Gnostics) throughout the empire held the following varieties of doctrine concerning God.

- Pristine Christian Monotheism: The earliest view articulated by Barnabas, Aristides, Justin, Tatian, Theophilus, and Tertullian (before he adopted Montanism), that there is one eternal, unbegotten, uncreated, God who is the source of all that exists. God begat a “Son” as “the Beginning” (of creation) from His own essence (of Spirit) who then became a mediator between Himself and mankind. He also extended Himself in power into the creation as “Spirit.” This divine Son of God chose to empty Himself permanently, to be transformed into full humanity in order to redeem us to God, so that we could become what He is now, glorified Man.
- Modalism: The oneness view of Praxeas, Noetus, and Sabellius – one eternal, unbegotten, uncreated, God who has interacted with creation and humanity through limited manifestations of Himself as “Spirit” and “Son.”
- Subordinate Trinitarianism: The Montanist view which included a third Person, systematized and popularized by Tertullian, with the addition of the dualistic

⁵¹ Gregory Thaumaturgus, A Declaration of Faith

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nature and temporary humanity for Christ (hypostatic union) first introduced by Melito.

- Co-equal & co-eternal Trinitarianism, first articulated by Origen, also adopting the idea of a Platonic incarnation.

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