

The Evolution of the Doctrine of Trinity in Early Christianity: Logos Doctrine and the Egyptian Divine Metaphysics as the Sources of the Tertullian Doctrine of the Trinity¹

INTRODUCTION

The most important characteristics differentiating Christianity from other religions is the doctrine of the Trinity which evolved through the conflation of selective pieces of biblical scripture with the Greek philosophical concepts and religious ideas of ancient Mediterranean region during the formative years of Christianity.

Several important sources of trinitarian thought are identified, largely ignored by scholars, including the Greek middle-Platonic philosophical writings of Numenius (fl. middle of the 2nd century) and Egyptian metaphysical writings and monuments representing divinity as a triune entity.

The doctrine was formulated explicitly by Tertullian (ca 170- ca 220) who coined the Latin term *trinitas* for the description of the three divine entities united by one substance in his doctrine of the Trinity. He translated and transformed the Greek term *trias* which was used in describing the Christian triad before him.

BEFORE TERTULLIAN

1. Pre-Socratics.

There is a long tradition of philosophical speculations on the cosmological principles. We find in the Pythagoras philosophy the triad of the cosmological principles, Monad, Dyad, and Harmony. The principle of Harmony immanent in the universe, was responsible for the proportional (*analogia*) relation (*logos*) of one thing to the other. Heraclitus and Anaxagoras further refined such a concept into an impersonal natural force or agent (cosmic fire) that creates the world from itself and again itself from the world.

2. Plato

It was Plato who introduced a strict dualistic view of reality dividing it into a realm of the real world of Forms. In his metaphysics Plato

¹ Marian Hillar, *From Logos to Trinity. The Evolution of Religious Beliefs from Pythagoras to Tertullian*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

differentiated the transcendental being, the Demiurge, pure Mind, fashioner of the world from the primordial unorganized matter.

But he is not equated with the supreme God of the Greek pantheon, Zeus, and he is not the personal omnipotent God of the Jews or Christians, Yahweh, or Allah of Muslims.

3. Xenocrates

Xenocrates elaborated further on the existence of the cosmic principles of Plato's philosophy eventually producing a basis for the abandonment of the theory of Ideas as separate entities and development of the view that they should be interpreted as thoughts in the divine intellect.

Xenocrates considered the human soul "the number that moves by itself" and the cause of life.

In one tradition Xenocrates differentiated between the supreme God, the Father, and the inferior God, the Son.

4. Logos in the Stoic Philosophy

We find fully a developed concept of the Logos in the Stoic philosophy. The Logos is understood as a natural active principle, thus noetic and rational, immanent in the world constituting the nature of beings. It enlivens and vitalizes creatures, it orders and maintains the world and is described by various names: Logos, Nature, Pneuma, Fate, God, Providence.

5. The Logos in Judaism

The Greek metaphysical concept of the Logos was utilized in the Hebrew religious mythical thought of Philo of Alexandria.

Philo bridged the Greek "scientific" and naturalistic philosophy with the mythical ideology of the Hebrew scriptures.

He introduced the Stoic-Platonic concept of the Logos into Judaism and in the process transformed it from a metaphysical natural entity into an extension of the divine being and mediator between God and man.

The metaphysical Platonic Ideas became in Philo's interpretation God's attributes and powers, sometimes exteriorized, which controlled the world.

6. The Jewish Messianic Traditions: the Source of Christian Scripture and Doctrines.

The Jewish Messianic tradition and its evolution together with the associated aspects of salvation – the yearning for immortality and the problem of moral evil expressed in the yearning for universal justice – extends from the pre-exilic and exilic eschatology and the Messianic Kingdom, through the tradition of the Kingdom of God, the Son of Man of the Book of Daniel, the Son of Man of the Enoch tradition (especially *1 Enoch* or

Ethiopic Apocalypse) to the *Psalms of Solomon*, and *Apocalypses of Baruch* and *Ezra*.

These sources were used by the writers of the New Testament scriptures for the development of their own messianic myths and metaphysical claims. Some of these writings were considered as “inspired” by the early church Fathers. The Jewish concept of the Messiah was further modified under the influence of Hellenistic philosophy and religion as is documented by the early church historians, Eusebius and Epiphanius.

The *Fourth Gospel* of John seems to be an example of the process of fusion of the Jewish mythological eschatological expectations with the Greek philosophical worldview. The Hebrew “word” of Genesis, a metaphor of God’s activity, could in John be interpreted in the Philonic manner as an agent of a transcendental God, the Logos. For the soteriological purpose it became embodied in human form as the man Jesus who became the Hellenistic Son of God.

This human form is a manifestation of the invisible and inaccessible God. From the testimony of Eusebius we may deduce that the earlier generations of messianists and the so-called apostles themselves did not teach the divinity of Jesus. The controversy in Christology led to the fragmentation of the growing Christian church and it was Emperor Constantine who sought unification by imposing for the first time the trinitarian formulation at the Council of Nicaea (325 C.E.).

7. Justin Martyr’s Logos Doctrine.

Justin Martyr (d. 165) contributed to the evolution of Christian religion into a philosophical doctrine by incorporation of the Philonic Logos doctrine and especially the doctrine of Numenius into the interpretation of the Christian messianic expectations.

He attempted to systematize assertions in developing Christianity into a rigorous and formalistic system based on the synoptic Gospels which he called *Memoirs of the Apostles*. He did not know the Gospel of John.

1. Justin fused these various traditions of the Logos with the function ascribed to the Son of God and the Holy Spirit and thus equated the Greek Logos with his concept of the cosmic Son of God, the cosmic Christ/Messiah, the Second Pneuma. By this he was able to show the general continuity of religious assertions and speculate that Christianity and Christians existed before the appearance of Jesus on earth.

It was possible because in the Heraclitean-Stoic tradition human reason was a part of the original divine Logos (originally cosmic fire, later *pneuma*) which we acquire through breathing. This Logos became the human Jesus. Jesus thus is the whole Logos, and while Christians live by the whole Logos of God by contemplating and knowing him, non-Christians impart only a part of the Logos.

2. Justin follows literally the metaphysical speculations of Numenius concerning the existence and relationship between three metaphysical Minds (Gods), the First Mind, the supreme God, the Second Mind equated with the Logos, and the Third Mind equated with the Holy Spirit.

Both Numenius and Justin use the emanational mechanism for explaining the connection between these three metaphysical entities. Justin insists, in contrast to Philo, on the numerical and functional distinction between his metaphysical entities. They are united, however, by the noetic substance, *pneuma*, the point which was not, however, explored by Justin.

3. Justin nowhere explicitly formulates the concept of eternal begetting of the Logos as Philo does, but he insists on the begetting of a numerically distinct Logos/Christ which exists already before the beginning, i.e., creation. But if time was created with the creation of the world as Philo assumes, then in the timeless existence of God begetting of his Logos must also have been timeless thus eternal.

He names this begotten Logos the Christ/Messiah. Begetting of the Logos was linked with the event of creation of the world; the event of incarnation of the Logos was linked with the begetting of the Christian people. Thus we have in Justin a doctrine of two generations of the Son of God – first as a pneumatic being named Logos and Christ, and second in his earthly form as a man named Jesus.

4. Justin Martyr interprets the divinity as a hierarchical metaphysical triad of the three divine beings, the Father, the Son and the Prophetic Spirit.

Justin uses the philosophical metaphysical categories of Numenius, the First Mind, the Second Mind and the Third Mind, ascribing to them the biblical religious appellations. The Second divine entity assumed human flesh and became Jesus. So the Jewish Messiah became a Greek Savior. Justin wanted to emphasize transcendentality of the First God, the Father, so he needed the Second God, the Son who was identified with the Logos and whose substance is Pneuma, and was generated as a pneumatic effluence from God the Father.

Justin also assumed the existence of the Third God, the Holy Spirit or the Prophetic Spirit who nevertheless was often identified with the Logos and the Son.

These three Pneumas must be the same God's Pneuma since they originate from it – three individuals in the unity of God's substance. But this point was not emphasized by Justin, it was Tertullian who recognized this unity. So Justin fused in an intricate scheme the Jewish biblical themes, the Hellenistic metaphysical concepts and the Christian mythology in one syncretic doctrine.

TERTULLIAN AND HIS DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

With Tertullian, Christianity enters into a new stage of its development. Contrary to the legend created by Eusebius and Jerome, Tertullian was a teacher of rhetoric in Carthage and a member of the literary circle there. Tertullian never left the church. His association with the

Montanists, who were quite orthodox in their religious doctrines, was result of his critical view of the evolving church into a powerful authoritarian organization.

The postulates of Tertullian:

1. Tertullian fully used the Logos Christology in a conscious effort to integrate Christianity and classical Greek culture. God is a transcendent being and it is impossible for him to enter into a direct relation with the world of time and space.
2. The Logos is the Prolation of God which took place only for and with the world as a necessary mediator to perform a work which God could not perform. Thus the Logos assumed its "own form" when God said "Let there be light."
3. Tertullian ascribed to light a metaphysical and ontological meaning .
4. The Logos is only a "portion" (*portio*) of God, in the same way as is the ray only a "portion" of the sun. The difference between them is in measure not of mode. The Logos is a produced and a reduced divinity, with its substance spirit or *pneuma*, brought to a level that could become creator and principle of the world.
5. The prolation of the Logos was a voluntary and temporary act of will of God. He is thus subordinate to and less than the Father subject to the Father's will and, after accomplishing his mission he returns to the divine substance.
6. Tertullian was very explicit as to the temporary origin of the Logos Son. His argumentation came from the analysis of the terms "God" and "Lord," and of "Father" and "Judge." The prolation of the Logos Son was a temporary mechanism to accomplish work by a transcendent God.
7. Tertullian postulated the unity of God by using the Egyptian concept, the "tri-unity."

Tertullian shows in his writings enormous knowledge of cultures and literatures of his time, a familiarity with Egyptian religion and with mystery religions, Greek as well as Egyptian: the story of Osiris and Isis, the triad of Sarapis, Isis, and Harpocrates, he alludes to the Egyptian hermetic writings. So it is only natural and logical to infer that he found useful the Egyptian concept of the trinity for interpretation of the Christian biblical mythology and, at the same time, explained it in metaphysical terms using the Middle Platonic Logos doctrine and the Stoic logical categories.

Egyptians since primordial times had an idea of a supreme One God (*neter uā*), which could be first applied to Re, Horus or Atum.

This supreme God is the divine substance, *paut*, that gave birth to other companies of inferior gods on earth and in heaven, and he created everything that exists on earth, and no other being existed with him.

Egypt is the only country in the Mediterranean basin where we find an idea of the divine tri-unity.

One of the oldest and most developed examples is the trinity found in the papyri *Hymns to Amun* composed during the Ramesside period (1308–1085 B.C.E.), where it is stated:

All gods are three: Amun, Re, and Ptah, without their seconds. His identity is hidden as Amun, he is Re as face, his body is Ptah.

Other example of a trinity of one substance may be the trinity of Atum, Shu and Tefnet:

Atum is he who (once) came into being, who masturbated in Ôn. He took his phallus in his grasp that he might create an orgasm by means of it, and so were born Shu and Tefnet.

O Atum Khoprer, you became high on the height, you rose up as the *bnbn*-stone in the Mansion of the "Phoenix" in Ôn, you spat out Shu, you expectorated Tefnet, and you set your arms about them as the arms of *ka*, that your essence might be in them.

8. God is one, but has the following internal structure, described in Tertullian's terminology as "dispensation" or "economy." He has a physical pneumatic Son (Filius), his Word (Sermo), who proceeded from himself. Through this Son all things are made and the world is maintained. The Son was sent by the Father into the virgin and was born as a man and God, as Son of Man and as Son of God, and is called Jesus the Anointed (Christ). He was resurrected by the Father, taken into heaven (in caelo) and he will come to judge all men, dead and alive, before the institution of God's kingdom on earth. In the meantime the Father in heaven sent the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete.

9. Before Tertullian there was a tradition of the unity of the Godhead as a concept derived from the Hebrew tradition, and a tradition of the triad, of his appearance and function, as formulated by the Apologists and based on Philonic hypostatization of the divine powers.

10. The innovation introduced by Tertullian was the ascription of the relative unity to the triadic entities found in the Christian Logos theory as the unity of substance. Starting from the baptismal formula, Tertullian distinguished three persons and prolations with specific names in one God who is the common substance as a mode of existence of God and his economy, that is, his internal organization.

Tertullian never defined what he meant by the term "person," we must understand this word as a depiction of a distinct divine individual with a distinct quality and function. Substance is the unifying element in the divinity while person is the differentiating characteristic in the life of God. If so, then there is no real division in the Godhead, only a purely relative modal distinction. But then Tertullian is in contradiction when he claims a reality of the Word and of the Holy Spirit by extension, as a *substantiva res* and a rational substance.

Another term used for "person" is "hypostasis" which originally meant a sediment, foundation, substructure, individual substance, individual existence or reality. In philosophical meaning it represents contrast between substances, the real things, and the reflection as in the mirror, or between

reality and illusion. From about 350 C.E. in the Christian world it meant "individual reality," "individual," and "person."

11. The task of Tertullian, therefore, was to develop a formula by which the complete deity of Jesus and the reality of his identity as the Logos or the Mediator are distinct from the source-deity yet without creating two Gods. In Logos theory the distinction was introduced between the transcendent God and the derivative God, the absolute and the relative, and special problems arise when we consider now the question of eternity or temporality of this distinction.

12. Tertullian was a profoundly Stoic philosopher who developed his understanding of the trinitarian God from the analysis of four general Stoic logical categories. His theory is based on the assumption of unity and unchangeability of the substance and the relative distinctiveness of the three members of the divinity, i.e., the spirit as the substance of God.

His concept of substance and the spirit as the material substance of God is unquestionably Stoic and used to describe the nature of God. The source of these assumptions is found in the four categories of being as formulated by the Stoics: substrates or substances of everything that exists (*hypokeimena*), qualities (*poia*), the modes of existence or dispositions (*pōs echonta*), and the relative modes or dispositions of existence (*pros ti pōs echonta*).

13. Tertullian, using such speculations, transposed the logical relationship between objects on the metaphysical existence of the divine Father and his Son, and also the third entity – the Holy Spirit. Thus the divine Father and the divine Son have their existence conditioned by their disposition only. They are not identical. Moreover, the Father makes a Son and the Son makes a Father by logical relationship, i.e., relative disposition.

14. Tertullian used a similar analysis for the term monarchy and deduced that it does not preclude the monarch from having a son or from ministering his own monarchy by a few agents. The unity of God (monarchy of the king) hinges on the unity of substance (closeness of the king's family or administrators) which is the basis for "internal dispensation" or "economy," that is, the internal organization of God. Transposing this analogy to the situation of the Deity, the Son derives his substance from the substance of the Father and does nothing without the Father's will, since he received his power from the Father. In this way the divine monarchy (i.e., unity) is preserved. The same applies to the "third degree," because the third pneumatic being, the Holy Spirit (*Spiritus*) proceeded from the Father through the Son (without explanation how and why).

15. Tertullian himself was very equivocal about the third person of the Trinity describing him also as the "*Spiritus in sermone*." Nevertheless, Tertullian was the first to call the Holy Spirit God explicitly in a theological treatise, but it seems that he only repeated what was probably religious folklore in the Greek environment. Tertullian, under the influence of the Logos speculation, was the first to conceive the Spirit as a prolation from the Son as the Son is from the Father, and therefore subordinate to the Son as the Son is to the Father. This is the most characteristic trait of his doctrine. Still

Tertullian preserved the conception of the Father as the ultimate source in his assertion that the Spirit, being the third degree in the Godhead, proceeds “from no other source than from the Father through the Son.”

16. Tertullian by analysis of the verbal formulations of the announcement of Jesus’ birth argues that by saying that it was the “Spirit of God” and not simply God who came upon Mary, the author wanted to emphasize that it was only a portion of the whole Godhead which entered her and became “the Son of God.” But, at the same time, the Spirit of God must be the same as the Word for the Spirit (*Spiritus*) is the substance of God and as such it must be the substance of the Word because the Word is the operation of the Spirit, and the two are one and the same. But how Tertullian equated the operation (*Sermo*) with the substantive being (*substantiua res*) is not explained. Thus the Spirit and the Word are God, but they are not actually the very same as the source. The Word is God insofar as it is of the same substance as God himself and as an actually existing being (*substantiua res*) and a portion of the Godhead.

17. After claiming to have established that there is a distinction between the Father and the Son without destroying their union by making an analogy to the union of the sun and the ray, or of the fountain and the river, Tertullian next attempted to establish that there is a distinction between the two natures united in the Son. Tertullian explained the mode in which the Word could exist in the flesh without transfiguration into flesh, because “The Word is God and ‘the Word of the Lord remains for ever’ (Isaiah 40:8) – even by holding on unchangeably to his own form.” Thus God cannot change in substance (undergo transfiguration), and the only possibility left was that the Word became clothed in flesh. Jesus is of both natures, of both substances remaining in opposition, God and Man. Moreover, Tertullian insisted that the property of each substance is so preserved that “The Spirit on one hand did all things in Jesus suitable to itself, such as miracles, and mighty deeds, and wonders; the flesh, on the other hand, exhibited the affections which belong to it.” Just as in the Godhead Tertullian saw three persons united by one substance, in his Christology the one person had two substances.

SUMMARY

Before Tertullian, Justin Martyr developed the Logos Christology and described the Christian Triad in terms of rank or order (*taxis*) of its members. The term goes back to Pythagoras and can be found in many cultures as representing groupings of three divinities. Tertullian’s innovation was that he developed the concept of a triune God applied to the Judeo-Christian story and changed the meaning of the original term *trias*. Tertullian shows in his writings enormous erudition and knowledge of cultures and literatures of his time, a familiarity with Egyptian religion, and mystery religions, Greek as well as Egyptian. He found useful the Egyptian concept of the triunity for interpretation of the Christian biblical texts and, at the same time, he explained it in metaphysical terms using the Middle Platonic Logos doctrine and the Stoic logical categories. His theory is based on the

assumption of unity and unchangeability of the substance i.e., the pneuma (spirit) as the substance of God and the relative distinctiveness of the three members of the divinity.