

Faith Pulpit

Jesus Christ As ‘God’ Before the Council of Nicea

According to the popular historiography of various cults, the doctrine of the deity of Jesus Christ was “created” by the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325. For instance, the Restoration Church of God publishes a tract entitled “Who Is Jesus? Do the Creeds Tell Us the Truth About Him?” This work asserts that the belief that Jesus is God is not found in the Scriptures, but was only instituted by the Nicene Council in the fourth century, “well after the New Testament apostolic times.”¹ A Christadelphian pamphlet entitled “Jesus: God the Son or Son of God?” argues along similar lines.² The Way International also contends that pagan concepts entered Christianity at the Council of Nicea, and that “if Jesus is God . . . we have not yet been redeemed.”³

I am sure that most readers of the Faith Pulpit are familiar with various texts in the New Testament that use the term God (theos) of the Son, Jesus Christ. For example, John 1:1–14 and John 20:28 immediately come to mind, but one may also include Titus 2:13, Hebrews 1:8, Romans 9:5, and 2 Peter 1:1. Murray J. Harris has written an important introduction to this topic, entitled *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993). This article will attempt to build upon Harris’s volume by briefly tracing the explicit use of theos in reference to Jesus into the second century.⁴

First, one may begin with the seven letters which Ignatius wrote on his way to martyrdom in Rome (around A.D. 115). Ignatius refers to Jesus Christ as theos about fourteen times.⁵ For example, he reminds the Ephesian church that their sufferings came only by “the will of the Father, and Jesus Christ, our God.”⁶ He also refers to Jesus’ divinity in relation to the incarnation: “God Himself was manifested in human form for the renewal of eternal life.”⁷ Ignatius clearly states that “Jesus Christ our Lord” is “God in the flesh.”⁸ He later adds, “For our God, Jesus the Christ, was according to the appointment of God, conceived in the womb by Mary, of the seed of David, but by the Holy Ghost.”⁹ Ignatius addressed his epistle to the Roman church, “which is beloved and enlightened by the will of

Him that willeth all things which are according to the love of Jesus Christ our God,” for whom he wished “abundance of happiness unblameably, in Jesus Christ our God.”¹⁰ He further tells the church of Smyrna, “I glorify God, even Jesus Christ, who has given you such wisdom.”¹¹ Elsewhere Ignatius exhorts, “Continue in intimate union with Jesus Christ, our God,”¹² and he pledges, “I pray for your happiness forever in our God, Jesus Christ.”¹³

Second, one may refer to the writings of Justin Martyr (c. 165). There is admittedly a strand of subordinationism in Justin Martyr’s theology.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Justin also explicitly describes the Son as theos: “If you had understood what has been written by the prophets, you would not have denied that He was God, Son of the only, unbegotten, unutterable God.”¹⁵ Christ “as God” is “strong and to be worshipped,”¹⁶ and He is “deserving to be worshipped as God and as Christ.”¹⁷ According to Justin, the Logos (Word) even spoke in the burning bush to Moses as the “Angel of the LORD,” saying: “I am that I am, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, and the God of your Fathers.”¹⁸

Third, one should consider the first sermon we have available outside the New Testament: On the Passover, by Melito of Sardis (who flourished around A.D. 170). Melito proclaims, “He rose from the dead as God, being by nature God and man. . . . This is Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”¹⁹ Elsewhere, Melito makes clear that the divinity of the Son did not begin only at the resurrection: “He who fastened the universe has been fastened to a tree; the Sovereign has been insulted; the God has been murdered.”²⁰ And again, “[T]he almighty God has made His dwelling through Christ Jesus.”²¹ This sermon further refers to Jesus Christ as theos in chapters 4 and 7. In addition, extant fragments of other sermons probably by Melito also label the Son as “God.”²²

Fourth, one might add an assortment of other second century writers: Polycarp (c. A.D. 115) refers to “all those who are under heaven who will believe in our Lord and God Jesus Christ and in his Father who raised him from the dead.”²³ A fragment of the apology of Aristides (c. A.D. 125) states, “The Christians trace the beginning of their religion to Jesus the Messiah. He is called the Son of the Most High God. It is said that God came down from heaven. He assumed flesh and clothed Himself with it from a Hebrew virgin.” The Epistle to Diognetus echoes, “As a king sends his son, who is also a king, so God sent Him (Jesus Christ). He sent Him as God.”²⁴ Second Clement, another second century sermon, exhorts: “Brethren, it is fitting that you should think of Jesus Christ as of God—as the Judge of the living and the dead.”²⁵

Finally, Athenagoras’ Plea (c. A.D. 178) is an example of the Son being called theos within the context of an incipient Trinitarianism in the second century, even though the work never uses the term Trinity.²⁶ According to Athenagoras, Christians “speak of God the Father, and of God the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” and “declare both their power in union and their distinction in order.”²⁷ Christians also know “what is the oneness of the Son with the Father, what is the communion of the Father with the Son, what is the Spirit, what is the unity of these three: the Spirit, the Son, the Father, and their distinction in

unity.”²⁸ Athenagoras concludes that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are “one in power.”²⁹ Fortman comments, “To have reached such an approximation to later Trinitarian dogma before the year 180 is remarkable and marks a great advance in the development of Trinitarian thought.”³⁰

Certainly second century authors often simply equated Jesus Christ with God without developing a full explanation or pursuing all the implications. At times they even stated monotheism and the deity of the Son side by side without attempting a systematic harmonization. These second century works do not consistently use such theological terms as person, substance,³¹ essence, nature,³² or Trinity, much less consubstantiality, or hypostatic union. Yet the divinity of Christ found a secure place in both the theology and worship of the early church. The British scholar Daniel F. Wright notes the important role of early Christian worship of Christ as God: “From the outset, Father, Son, and Spirit were named together in baptism and in benediction (as in Matt. 28:19,20 and 2 Cor. 13:14). Christians at worship regularly expressed what theologians struggled to articulate satisfactorily.”³³ Whatever their shortcomings, these second century authors clearly and explicitly affirmed that Jesus was theos, “God.” There is, therefore, a constant strand of tradition that refers to Jesus Christ as theos all the way from the New Testament to the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325.

Works Cited

1. <http://www.mindspring.com/~anthonybuzzard/jesus.htm>
2. <http://www.christadelphia.org/pamphlet/jesus.htm>
3. <http://www.pacinter.net/users/chawman/Wayint.html>
4. For the sake of convenience, I end the the material of this study around A.D. 180, before the first substantial “theologian” of the early church, Irenaeus of Lyons. But Irenaeus also refers to the Son as theos.
5. See Edmund J. Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 39.
6. Ephesians 1.1. With the exception of Melito’s works, all the quotations in this study are based on the Ante-Nicene Fathers series (ANF). The translation of Melito’s works comes from Stuart G. Hall’s study *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha and Fragments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
7. Ephesians 19.3.
8. Ephesians 7.2.
9. Ephesians 18.2.
10. Romans inscription.
11. Smyrnaeans 1.1.
12. Trallians 7.
13. Polycarp 8.
14. “Subordinationism” was a belief that the Son’s divinity was in some sense inferior to the Father’s. Various early writers exhibited differing tendencies toward subordinationism. Justin’s “subordinationist” leanings are due to the intricacies of his “Logos Christology.” Other “subordinationist” texts in Justin that explicitly refer to the Logos/Son as “God” are found in *Apology* 63; and *Dialogue with Trypho* 56; 125.
15. *Dialogue with Trypho* 126.
16. *Dialogue with Trypho* 76.
17. *Dialogue with Trypho* 63; cf. 68.
18. *Apology* 63.
19. *On Pascha* 8–10.
20. *On Pascha* 96. We would prefer a precise reference to the “God-man” (theanthropos) being murdered (and able to die in His humanity). Melito has been accused of “modalism,” but he does differentiate between the Father and the Son (i.e., *On Pascha* 104-105). In any case, Melito clearly uses theos of Jesus Christ. A later writer could rhetorically ask, “For who does not know the books of Irenaeus and Melito and the rest, which proclaim Christ as God and man?” (*Fragment 8a*).
21. *On Pascha* 45.

22. Fragment 15 and “New fragment” II.4, 21. Other fragments of Melito also refer to Jesus Christ as “God” (Fragment 6 and 14), but Hall does not believe that their authenticity is as certain. See Hall, Melito of Sardis, xxviii-xxix.
23. Philippians. 12.2. This translation is my own. Some of the extant manuscripts omit “and God” in this phrase.
24. Epistle to Diognetus 7.
25. 2 Clement 1.
26. Tertullian was the first writer to use the term Trinity (Latin trinitas), around A.D. 212/213 (Prax. 3). Prior to this, Theophilus of Antioch had used the term triad (Greek trias), around 180 (To Autolycus 2.15).
27. Plea 10.
28. Plea 12.
29. Plea 24; cf. Plea 6.
30. Fortman, The Triune God, 49.
31. Fragment 6 of Melito uses the term ousia, but this fragment may not be authentic. See Hall, Melito of Sardis, xxviii-xxix.
32. Melito’s On Pascha 8 does employ the word phusis, or “nature.”
33. Encyclopedia of Early Christianity, ed. by Everett Ferguson (New York, Garland, 1990). S.v. “Trinity.”

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