

CHRISTIANITY—THE FIRST 300 YEARS

Apologists and Heretics

THE APOLOGISTS AND ANTE-NICENE FATHERS

The Apologists were 2nd and 3rd century Christian leaders who wrote treatises defending Christianity against its critics. Prominent apologists include Quadratus, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Origen, among others. Their primary goal was to “apologize” or defend Christianity against false rumors, accusations, and persecution. In their writings, they clarified what Christians believed over against an often-hostile public that had limited or distorted information. They engaged within the philosophical and cultural context of the Greco-Roman world, offering a reasoned case for Christianity.

Quadratus (writing ca. AD 125-130) *Quadratus is widely regarded as the earliest of the apologists, presenting a defense of Christianity to Emperor Hadrian while he was in Athens celebrating the Eleusinian mysteries. The Christians in Athens were being harassed, and Publius, the Bishop in Athens, had been martyred. We know of Quadratus primarily through later writers like Eusebius and Jerome, and only fragments of his Apology for Christianity survive through secondary sources.*

Justin Martyr *Justin, a converted Samaritan, wrote two apologies and a dialogue, all of which have survived. His First Apology defended Christian ethics and sought to convince Emperor Antoninus Pius to suspend the persecution of Christians. He argued that the “seeds” of Christianity predated the coming of Christ, and he included some of the Greek philosophers, like Socrates and Plato, as “unknowing Christians.” Justin was martyred by beheading sometime in the 160s.*

Tertullian *Tertullian, an early Christian writer from Carthage, was the first to produce extensive writings in Latin. As an apologist, he sought to defend the faith against heresies and the criticism of Christians by pagans. Some of his most influential ideas concerned the Trinity, and altogether, some 31 of his works have survived. In particular, he opposed Gnosticism as well as Marcion, the latter who rejected the Hebrew Bible and parts of the New Testament.*

Origen *Origen was an early Christian scholar and theologian in Alexandria, Egypt in the first half of the 3rd century. His primary scholarly work was the Hexapla, a critical edition of the Old Testament comparing six different translations in an effort to counter Gnostic and Jewish attacks on early Christianity. The original is estimated at 6500 pages, taking more than 28 years to complete. He also penned Against Celsus, an intellectual defense of Christianity against a pagan philosopher. He was brutally tortured by Emperor Decius for failing to recognize the emperor as divine, and he eventually died from his injuries in AD 254.*



While most of Justin Martyr's works are lost, two apologies and a dialogue survive. He is revered as a saint by the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern Orthodox churches.

Early Christianity

Besides the Apologists, a number of prominent Christian leaders are generally grouped as the Ante-Nicene Fathers, which is to say, those Christian leaders who lived and ministered prior to the Nicene Council in AD 325. They wrote in two languages, and hence, they are subdivided into the Greek Fathers and the Latin Fathers.

THE ANTE -NICENE FATHERS

These prominent Christian leaders in the Ante-Nicene Period wrote in two languages, Greek and Latin.

The Greek Fathers:

- **Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130-c.202):** A disciple of Polycarp, his most well-known work is *Against Heresies*, emphasizing that Christian unity must derive from uniform Christian theology.
- **Clement of Alexandria (c.150-c.215):** He is most well-known for developing a type of Christian Platonism.
- **Origen (184-253):** Probably the most scholarly of the early Christian leaders, he wrote commentaries on all the books of the Bible.
- **Hippolytus of Rome (c.170-235):** One of the most prolific writers, he was a disciple of Irenaeus.

The Latin Fathers:

- **Tertullian (c. 155-c. 240):** He is famous for describing God as “three Persons, one Substance.”
- **Cyprian (200-258):** Bishop of Carthage, he eventually died as a martyr.

Their writings are translated into English and available in various published formats.

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THE HERETICS

Heresy is a teaching that the Christian church at large considered to be erroneous or dangerous to the faith. It is probably important to point out that there were various disagreements within the early church that did NOT threaten the core of the Christian faith. Further, it is probably unfair to charge that all heretics were attempting to undermine Christianity: they sometimes were struggling to clarify theological ideas, and their conclusions ended up on the wrong side of the theology of the larger church. Still, the rise of heresies forced the early Christians to better define themselves, and at least in this regard, the heretics provided an important incentive. Heretics were not necessarily bad or evil people; however, they arrived at answers to theological questions that, in the end, did not win the day and were judged to be unfaithful to the Scriptures. The outcome of these debates and decisions is what we consider orthodox Christianity.

The Ebionites

One of the earlier heresies, the Ebionites (based on the Aramaic word for “the poor”) developed among Jewish Christians. They held that traditional Judaism had misinterpreted the books of Moses concerning sacrifice, and Jesus came to correct this error. However, while they largely upheld the Gospel of Matthew (they omitted some sections), they emphatically did not like the writings of Paul. They did not accept Christ as divine, though they did believe he ended the Old Testament sacrificial system.

Early Christianity

The Gnostics

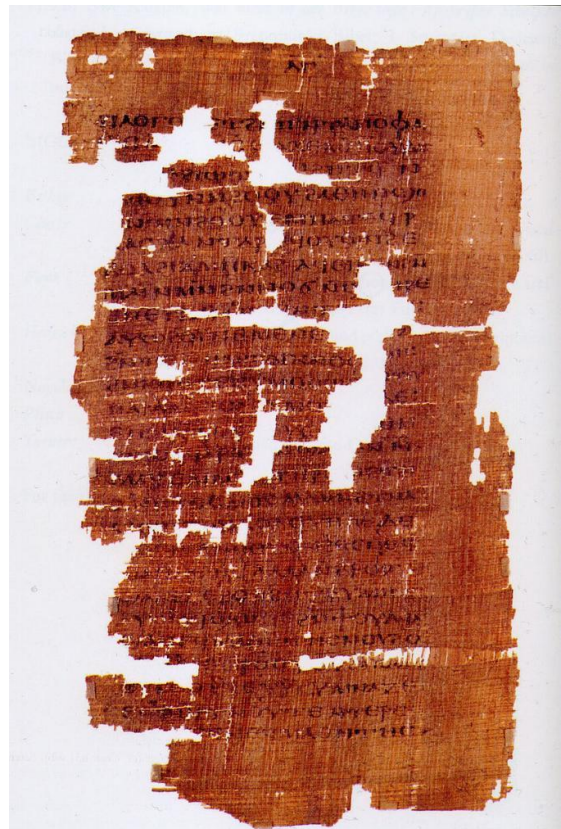
Gnosticism was a collection of religious ideas flourishing in the mid-2nd century among some Christians. Rather than focusing on sin and repentance, as was true of the apostles, the Gnostics focused on concepts of personal enlightenment. The goal was to escape the physical world, and salvation was to be liberated from the prison of the body. Gnostics especially emphasized personal spiritual knowledge, and their name derives from the Greek word *γνωσις* (= knowledge). They wrote their own versions of gospels (and these versions were many decades later than the canonical gospels and not within the era of any eyewitnesses). They held that their writings contained the only true version of Jesus. They objected to the Eucharist, since how could a physical meal of bread and wine have anything to do with pure spiritual truth?

Especially, Gnostic ideas were problematic with regard to Christ and God. They embraced the Greek philosophical idea that “spirit” is all good, while “matter” is all evil. Such a view made impossible the incarnation of Christ as well as his bodily resurrection from the dead. Gnosticism was not monolithic, however, since some, the Docetists, believed that Christ only seemed to have a real human body, but his apparent body was an illusion. Others, who followed a leader named Cerinthus, held that Christ and Jesus were two separate beings, Christ being divine and Jesus being human. Their union was only temporary. For many centuries, our knowledge of Gnostic ideas largely came from secondary ancient sources of the Christian leaders who opposed them. However, in 1945 a huge Gnostic library was discovered at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, and we gained firsthand access to actual Gnostic writings, with contain several additional gospels along with other texts.

Hence, it is not surprising that the early church fathers denounced Gnosticism as heresy and advocated the destruction of their texts.

Marcion

In the mid-140s AD, a teacher in Rome was determined to sever Christianity from Judaism as much as possible. He argued that Jesus came from a superior God, a God of love (good God), who had nothing to do with the God of Israel, who was a God of laws (bad God). As such, the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) was to be rejected outright, along with any Christian texts that seemed to conflict with his point of view. He created his own canon, embracing only the Gospel of Luke and ten letters of Paul.



Page from the Gnostic Gospel of Judas, made famous when a translation was published in National Geographic magazine in 2006.

Early Christianity

If nothing else, Marcion spurred the church to wrestle with the issue of what they considered to be sacred Scripture, and in the end, the church would embrace both the Old Testament as well as four gospels, all the letters of Paul, and the other books that comprise the New Testament.

The Montanists

In the mid-2nd century in Phrygia near the Black Sea, a teacher named Montanus began to announce prophetically that the age of the Father was past, the age of the Son was past, and the new age of the Holy Spirit had arrived. Soon, the world would end, and a New Jerusalem would descend from heaven upon a mountain near the village of Pepuza, Phrygia. Montanus believed himself to be the embodiment of the Holy Spirit with new revelations, and unlike the larger church, which held that new revelation had ended with Jesus and the apostles, he claimed new inspiration and new theological ground. According to Eusebius, Montanus would be seized in a sort of frenzy and ecstasy, babbling strange things and claiming to speak the very words of God. Supported by two female prophets, Maximilla and Priscilla, he gained a considerable following as far as north Africa and Gaul. However one assesses their credibility, one cannot doubt their sincerity. Some Montanists were martyred for their beliefs during the emperorship of Marcus Aurelius.

Debates About the Godhead

The language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was widely used in the church following the apostles themselves, both in concise statements (Mt. 28:19; Ro. 15:30; 2 Co. 13:14; Ep. 2:18) as well as in longer constructions (1 Co. 12:4-6; Ga. 4:4-6; Ep. 1:3, 11, 13; 4:4-6; Tit. 4:4-6; Jude 20-21). The Father was worshiped as God, the Son as God, and the Holy Spirit as God. However, even though the Christians recognized only one God, as was true in the Old Testament (cf. Dt. 6:4), the Son is never addressed as the Father nor the Father as the Son. Prayer is directed to the Father in the name of the Son (Jn. 16:23-24; Ro. 8:15b; 15:6; 2 Co. 11:31; Ga. 4:6; Ep. 2:18; 3:14; 5:20; Col. 1:3, 12; 3:17). The post apostolic church continued using this triadic language. This paradoxical language gave rise to various debates about the nature of the Godhead.

The **Ebionites** refused to recognize the deity of Christ. The **Gnostics** rejected the idea of incarnation. The **Marcionites** embraced a two-God theology, pitting one against the other. The **Modalists**, following leaders like Praxeas and Sabellius, decided that the Father, Son, and Spirit should be understood as phases or modes through which God passed: he was the Father in creation and in the Old Testament, he was the Son in the New Testament, and he became the Spirit in the life of the church. The **Manichaeans**, who followed Mani of Persia and claimed to have received the final, universal revelation, argued that reality consisted of two independent and eternal principles, Light/God and Darkness/Matter. They combined features of Zoroastrianism and Indian thought with Christianity, including the idea of reincarnation. It was against these various alternative views that leaders in the late 2nd century, like Theophilus of Antioch and Tertullian of North Africa, began using the word “Trinity” to describe the Godhead (τριας in Greek; *trinitas* in Latin). As such, God is a complex one (as opposed to a simple one). Jesus was God the Son incarnate, and he is eternally the Son. God in his essential nature is one substance or essence (*ousia*) in three persons (*hypostasis*).