

The Nicene Doctrines of the Trinity and Personhood of Jesus



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Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam

This paper explores why the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity was necessary to make sense of the extraordinary claims orthodox Christianity was making about Jesus Christ and as a counter to the tensions and erroneous ideas arising in the Church surrounding the issue of who exactly Jesus was. It also explores how the tradition of Judeo-Christian monotheism was preserved and proclaimed anew by this doctrine of the Triune God and ultimately what all of this tells us about the development of doctrine in the Church.

The Central Question: Who Is Jesus?

There was a frequently sighted bumper-sticker a few years ago that proclaimed “Jesus IS the Answer.” Indeed Jesus is an answer for many but Jesus saw himself more as a question: Who do people say I am? And more importantly: Who do YOU say that I am? Jesus is not so much concerned about how people feel about him or what people think about his teachings, instead he asks “Who am I to you”?

It is the quest to answer this question that caused much speculation and theorizing and along with it, enormous disagreement, instability and conflict in the early Church. It would take over 700 years before the Church finally and fully clarified the matter, starting at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, through several subsequent Ecumenical Councils, and culminating at the 3rd Council of Constantinople in 681 AD. That said, I dare say, the question of the precise nature of Jesus remains with us to this day. It continues to drive, disturb and divide the Christian community and the world. Jesus remains a deeply disconcerting figure, because if he is who the Church proclaims him to be – and who he claimed to be – True God and True man - then his call to complete self-emptying conversion is not optional but rather God’s new and radical commandment. And that is a tall order for us all.

God is One

The early days of Christianity were essentially very Jewish in character. To understand the mindset of the era then we must start at Sinai and the beginning of Israel’s formation as a people. There Moses ascended the mountain after the Hebrews were free from Pharaoh’s grip, and God spoke to him the following words:

"So shall you say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel. You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and [how] I bore you on eagles' wings, and I brought you to Me. And now, if you obey Me and keep My covenant, you shall be to Me a treasure out of all peoples, for Mine is the entire earth. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of princes and a holy nation." (Exodus 19:3-6)

Then Moses asked a very reasonable question: Who are you?

“Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ What shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM’ has sent me to you.”” God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: this is my name for ever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.” (Exodus 3:13-15)

At long last God revealed his Holy Name: אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, - ehyeh asher ehyeh – I AM WHO I AM – or better I AM THAT I AM. In his very name, the God of Israel revealed that he is THE transcendent maker and Lord of the universe. This expose’ of the very nature of God is amazingly sophisticated and extremely unique from all the notions of God and of cosmology in the world at that time. Israel’s God, **YHWH**, is beyond, before and above all creation - or as St. Augustine would say years later, God is *ipsum esse*, “existence itself.” Even later Aquinas would say it this way:

- **YHWH** is not the effect of another cause. **YHWH** is the “uncaused cause”.
- **YHWH** is not the actualization whereby some entity fulfilled or moved to its full potential. There is no potential in **YHWH**. There is only the actuality of His being.
- **YHWH**’s existence is not contingent on other forces. **YHWH** simply exists.

Every Jew in the time of Jesus knew God in this profound way. Why? Because in the over 1400 years from Moses to Jesus, all Jews defined themselves (and do to this day) in terms of their exclusive relationship with this unique and singular transcendent God. Twice a day, every day, devout Jews affirmed their relationship to, and an understanding of God in the core prayer of Israel, **The Shema**.

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה יְהוָה אֶחָד.... *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai echad...*

Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God; the Lord is one.

וְאֶהְבֶּתְךָ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ ...Ve'ahavta et YHWH/(Adonai) Eloheykha bekol-levavkha u'vekhol nafshekha u'vekhol me'odekha.

You shall love the Lord with your whole heart and your whole might and your whole soul.

All the traditions and liturgical practices of Israel from the Temple and the synagogue, to the familial homes and personal religious practices of Jews, even to the present day, are based on this core belief: The Lord is Our God and is ONE. As Luke Timothy Johnson states in his book *The Creed*, the Shema reminds every Jew that **YHWH** is exclusively theirs and is singular, and that there are no other gods. **YHWH** is also “communal” as he relates to the whole nation of Israel in a special way above all other nations, namely that Israel IS **YHWH**’s “chosen people,” and that **YHWH** requires a dedicated, unwavering relationship of love and obedience with every individual in the community. No other gods familiar to Jews of Jesus’ time had such a connection. None were like **YHWH**.

The Christian Conundrum

In the midst of this steadfast, laser-like focus on the one, transcendent God of Israel, Jesus emerges onto the scene in approximately 30 AD, speaking with the very authority of the Torah and performing miracles and making statements reserved to **YHWH** himself.

Only **YHWH** can forgive sin, yet Jesus says, “Go in peace your sins are forgiven.” Only **YHWH** can give life, yet Jesus says “Lazarus! Come forth”! Only **YHWH** can heal illness, yet Jesus says “Arise and walk”! Only **YHWH** provides the law and defines one’s way of life, yet Jesus says, “I am the truth, the way and the life.” Only **YHWH** is the Master of Creation, yet with Jesus “...who is this that the wind and the sea obey him.” Only **YHWH** is to be worshiped in the Temple, yet Jesus says, “I tell you that something greater than the temple is here.” Only **YHWH** says love me with your whole heart, yet Jesus says, “Unless you love ME...you cannot be my disciple.” Only **YHWH** is the giver of the commandments, yet Jesus says, “I give you a new commandment, love one another as I have loved you.”

Slowly the first Christians, the disciples, began to realize this Jesus is no mere prophet or magician but something marvelous...someone perhaps even divine! In Mark Chapter 10 we read “...And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were filled with awe, and those who followed were afraid.” Why awe and fear? Is that not the usual reaction when one finds oneself in the presence of God? It was Peter who first finally said what others were thinking: “But you. Who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ the Son of the living God” to which Jesus replies “Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 15-16)

After the resurrection, the knowledge that Jesus was God was etched into the soul of the Church. In his Gospel, St. John explains “In the beginning was the Word and the word was with God and the word WAS God!” According to St. John, the transcendent God IS Jesus, who was present before and at the creation of the world. St. Paul devoted his life to spreading the Word to the Gentiles proclaiming, “Jesus Christ is LORD!” (Rom 10; Phil 2, etc). Not only is Jesus the משיח (mashiach), the promised messiah, or Χριστός (Christ), the anointed one, but he is יְהוָה, ADONAI – The LORD!

Just as the Jews were (and still are) obsessed with the nature of **YHWH**, Christians, as Professor Phillip Carey says in his *History of Christian Theology*, were (and still are) obsessed with the nature of Jesus. And so, just as the Jews captured this core belief about **YHWH** in the Shema, the early Church summarized its core belief in the κήρυγμα (kerygma) represented as the fish!

The Ιχθύς (Ichthus – which is the Greek word for fish) first appeared in the second century. The word is a mnemonic that stands for:

Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ", (Iēsous Christos, Theou Yios, Sōtēr which translates into English as "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior."



- Iota (i) is the first letter of ĭēsous (Ἰησοῦς), Greek for "Jesus".
- Chi (ch) is the first letter of Christos (Χριστός), Greek for "anointed."
- Theta (th) is the first letter of Theou (Θεοῦ), Greek for "God's."
- Upsilon (y) is the first letter of (h)ygios (Υἱός), Greek for "Son".
- Sigma (s) is the first letter of sōtēr (Σωτήρ), Greek for "Savior."

The kerygma (a Greek word meaning “kernel” or “seed”) summarized the fullness of apostolic preaching. It captured and proclaimed the core of Christ’s ministry. Once this seed was planted into a person, they could never again be the same. Once you believed that Jesus is the Christ, The Son of the Living God and the Savior of the world, how could you go to the temple and worship pagan idols? How could you continue oppress those lower on the social scale? How could you continue to live in sin? You had become instead a “new creation in Christ” as Paul often said (2 COR 5:17). It was the blossoming of this seed of faith – along with an unwavering belief in an imminent return of Christ to judge the world - that motivated early Christians to a radical change in life style and even to martyrdom. In spite of the presence now of the “SON of GOD,” somehow the oneness God remained unquestioned. As Jesus himself said: “He who sees me sees the One who sent me” (John 12:44) and “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). Case closed. אֲדֹנָי אֶחָד! Adonai echad! – The LORD is One - still!

However - Enquiring Minds Want to Know

The marvelous infrastructure of the Roman Empire (roads, canals, ports, etc.) and the political stability and commercial prosperity (relatively speaking) provided by the Pax Romana (The Peace of Rome), facilitated Christianity’s spread beyond the Jewish and Eastern world into the cultures of the West. Here the philosophical and budding scientific thought of the Greco-Roman mind needed and demanded further explanation - explanations based on logic and metaphysics, not merely on myth and belief. The Greeks in particular, had been debating and hypothesizing for eons about the nature and source of the universe (re: Heraclitus), about the “problem of the one and the many” (Panlogism), and even about “atoms” as the basis for existence (Democritus). And now they are presented with the notion of a singular God, the source of the universe, who also has a Son who is God but is also human, because he died...but then rose from the dead ...and who now sits at God’s right hand...who sends forth a spirit, etc., etc., etc... Suffice it to say, many people had questions.

How can **YHWH**, the ever present, all powerful, immutable God of Israel, the one God, who created all that is, whose very name – **YHWH** – I Am That I Am - have “caused” or “realized” a Son? And if there is such a Son, would he not be “contingent” on **YHWH** and therefore not be God? And if there was a time when there was no Jesus, but now there suddenly is a Jesus who is also God, does that mean God changed somehow? And if he changes, is he really then God? How can a perfect and infinite God take on an imperfect and finite form as a human? How can God die?

I will posit that it was (and still is) the honest and sincere pursuit of answers to questions such as these that led directly to the emergence of many, divergent theories about the nature of God and in particular about the nature of Jesus. All of these were attempts to answer that nagging question from Jesus: “Who do you say that I am”?

The Heresies

A text book definition (see Merriam Webster) of a heresy is “...an adherence to a religious opinion contrary to ... a dominant theory, opinion, or practice; an opinion, doctrine, or practice contrary to the truth or to generally accepted beliefs or standards.” Two things emerge from this definition that define how doctrine comes about. First, there is an existing commonly held belief within the community. And second, that the new idea is a divergence or repudiation of that broadly held belief. The emergence of heresy frequently stimulates the believing body to respond, at least by engaging in argument with the deviants in the hope of persuading them to recant, or in pronouncing a definitive statement that reconfirms the original belief and further clarifies it to ensure no further misunderstanding can arise. In the extreme case, the response can also be outright condemnation, excommunication and even some form or corporal of capital punishment.

In the case of the early Church, some of these deviations were mere differences of opinion, but others became significantly different concepts. Some deviations were held by relatively small or obscure numbers of people, but others became broadly held in their own right. In some cases, especially when the religious differences were exploited by civil authorities, in order to achieve some political, economic or strategic end, the differing beliefs led to civil strife and even violence. Likewise, the response to a heresy was based on the type and breadth and nature of the threat to the core belief. In most cases, the original body – in this case the Church – used these opportunities to clearly and formally define what it believes and what it sees as true. Thus a “doctrine” i.e. a “teaching” is born.

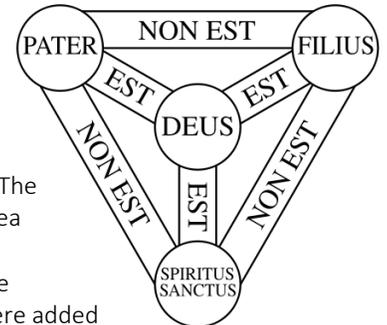
With due credit to Wikipedia, the following is an edited list of heresies that plagued the Church in the first 700 years of its young life. All focus in one way or another on the question of ‘Who is Jesus?’ and how his existence affects our notion of the nature of God. All elicited some response by the Church that eventually resulted in the elegant and profound clarifications that we now know as the *Doctrines of the Holy Trinity and The Personhood of Jesus*.

Heresy	Description	Origin	Church Response
Adoptionism	Belief that Jesus was born as a mere (non-divine) man, was supremely virtuous and that he was adopted later as "Son of God" by the descent of the Spirit on him.	Propounded by Theodotus of Byzantium, a leather merchant, in Rome c.190, later revived by Paul of Samosata	Theodotus was excommunicated by Pope Victor and Paul was condemned by the Synod of Antioch in 268
Apollinarism	Belief that Jesus had a human body and lower soul (the seat of the emotions) but a divine mind. Apollinaris further taught that the souls of men were propagated by other souls, as well as their bodies.	Proposed by Apollinaris of Laodicea (died 390)	Declared to be a heresy in 381 by the First Council of Constantinople
Apollinarism	Denial of the true divinity of Jesus Christ taking various specific forms, but all agreed that Jesus Christ was created by the Father, that he had a beginning in time, and that the title "Son of God" was a courtesy one.	The doctrine is associated with Arius (ca.AD 250—336) who lived and taught in Alexandria, Egypt.	Arius was first pronounced a heretic at the First Council of Nicea, he was later exonerated as a result of imperial pressure and finally declared a heretic after his death. The heresy was finally resolved in 381 by the First Council of Constantinople.
Docetism	Belief that Jesus' physical body was an illusion, as was his crucifixion; that is, Jesus only seemed to have a physical body and to physically die, but in reality he was incorporeal, a pure spirit, and hence could not physically die	Tendencies existed in the 1st century, but it was most notably embraced by Gnostics in subsequent centuries.	Docetism was rejected by the ecumenical councils and mainstream Christianity, and largely died out during the first millennium AD.
Macedonians	While accepting the divinity of Jesus Christ as affirmed at Nicea in 325, they denied that of the Holy Spirit which they saw as a creation of the Son, and a servant of the Father and the Son	Allegedly founded in 4th century by Bishop Macedonius I of Constantinople, Eustathius of Sebaste was their principal theologian.	Opposed by the Cappadocian Fathers and condemned at the First Council of Constantinople.
Monophysitism	Belief that Christ's divinity dominates and overwhelms his humanity, as opposed to the Chalcedonian position which holds that Christ has two natures, one divine and one human or the Miaphysite position which holds that the human nature and pre-incarnate divine nature of Christ were united as one divine human nature from the point of the Incarnation onwards.	After Nestorianism was rejected at the First Council of Ephesus, Eutyches emerged with diametrically opposite views.	Eutyches was excommunicated in 448. Monophysitism and Eutyches were rejected at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Monophysitism is also rejected by the Oriental Orthodox Churches
Monothelism	Belief that Jesus Christ had two natures but only one will. This is contrary to the orthodox interpretation of Christology, which teaches that Jesus Christ has two wills (human and divine) corresponding to his two natures	Originated in Armenia and Syria in AD 633	Monothelism was officially condemned at the Third Council of Constantinople (the Sixth Ecumenical Council, 680–681). The churches condemned at Constantinople include the Oriental Orthodox, Syriac, Armenian, and Coptic churches as well as the Maronite church, although the latter now deny that they ever held the Monothelite view and are presently in full communion with the Bishop of Rome.
Nestorianism	Belief that Jesus Christ was a natural union between the Flesh and the Word, thus not identical, to the divine Son of God.	Advanced by Nestorius (386–450), Patriarch of Constantinople from 428–431. The doctrine was informed by Nestorius' studies under Theodore of Mopsuestia at the School of Antioch.	Condemned at the First Council of Ephesus in 431 and the Council of Chalcedon in 451, leading to the Nestorian Schism. Advanced by Nestorius (386–450), Patriarch of Constantinople from 428–431. The doctrine was informed by Nestorius' studies under Theodore of Mopsuestia at the School of Antioch.
Psilanthropism	Belief that Jesus is "merely human": either that he never became divine, or that he never existed prior to his incarnation as a man.		Rejected by the ecumenical councils, especially in the First Council of Nicea, which was convened to deal directly with the nature of Christ's divinity.
Sabellianism	Belief that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three characterizations of one God, rather than three distinct "persons" in one God.	First formally stated by Noetus of Smyrna c.190, refined by Sabellius c.210 who applied the names merely to different roles of God in the history and economy of salvation.	Noetus was condemned by the presbyters of Smyrna. Tertullian wrote <i>Adversus Praxeam</i> against this tendency and Sabellius was condemned by Pope Callistus.

The Doctrines of the Trinity and The Personhood of Jesus

It took over 700 years, all the way to the 3rd Council of Constantinople for the Church to thoroughly refute the divergent and heretical views and define who Jesus is to the Church and what is the nature of the community of love known as the Holy Trinity. Although one would like to hope that the motives behind the clarification were purely theological, for the most part, the motive was more political and a matter of civil governance. All six of the councils that defined the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, were in fact called by the Emperors of the Roman state, who for the sake of a unified and stable society within the Empire, wanted these issues defined and settled and so took it upon themselves to do so.

Although it originates from the 12th century, the resulting doctrine, once all arguments were settled, is depicted to the right as the Shield of the Trinity. The doctrine has three parts: 1) the oneness of God, 2) that there are three modalities or “persons” in God – Father, Son and Spirit, and 3) that Jesus has two distinct natures - divine and human.



Although many statements of belief had been in use across Christendom for some time (The Apostles Creed used in Rome for example), what emerged starting at the Council of Nicaea and with additions and refinements from subsequent Councils, was a definitive, fairly comprehensive and universal “credo” (Lat: “I believe”) or declaration and summary of the Christian faith. Many of the elements had existed before Nicaea, but some elements were added specifically to counter heretical points of view such as those from Theodotus, Arius, Nestorius, and others.

Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

This Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed specifically states:

“We believe in ONE GOD...” who is Maker of heaven and earth reaffirming the claim of the Shema that the Lord is One.

...and we believe in “one LORD Jesus Christ” who is “Light from Light, true God from true God,” proclaiming Jesus’ divinity. Jesus Christ is said to be “begotten, not made,” asserting that he was not a mere creature, but the true Son of God, and is “one in being with the Father” as defined by the Greek term **ὁμοούσιος** (homoousios), or “consubstantial” with God, i.e. of the same substance as God...and that through Him all things were made, affirming that He existed as the transcendent God before time and creation began and that He is the Creator God.

...and that Jesus came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became human, affirming that Jesus was both God and man, and that Mary was the Mother of God as well as the Mother of the human Jesus who, as a human, was crucified, died and was buried.

...and that he is “seated at the right hand of the Father” and thus exalted for all eternity and from whence He shall judge the living and the dead and that He will establish God’s Kingdom that will have no end.

...and finally, we affirm that the third **ὑπόστασις** (hypostasis) of God, the Holy Spirit, proceeds from God and is also Lord – ADONAI, the Giver of Life and who is likewise worshiped and glorified.

This is the faith of our Fathers and what defines us as the inheritors of the promise to Israel, as Children of the Father, and as Disciples of Christ. It is this Creed that defines us as Christians...

...and thus, we are able to finally and definitively answer Christ’s question: “*Who do you say that I am?*”?