

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09915-8 - Documents in Early Christian Thought

Edited by Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this book is easier to describe than to achieve. Its purpose is to bring within the compass of a single volume a representative selection of extracts from the writings of the early Christian Fathers covering all the main areas of Christian thought. The importance of the Fathers as those who gave a distinctive and lasting shape to Christian theology is universally recognized. Those who have the time and the skill to read the writings of the Fathers *in extenso* and in the original will have no need of this volume. But we believe that there are an increasing number, not only of theological students, who would welcome a book which will introduce them to the thought of the Fathers at first hand. It is for such people that this book is designed.

The extracts are arranged topically. We have tried to select passages which make their point in a sufficiently self-contained manner to make sense when removed from their wider context, which are long enough not merely to declare a conclusion but to illustrate the kind of reasoning which leads up to it, and yet short enough to allow us to cover all the main areas of thought. The period is most renowned for its determination of 'orthodox' belief and denunciation of 'heresy'. Some of the passages given come from directly polemical writings of this kind. But the Fathers did not indulge only in polemics. They preached, they taught, they wrote letters, they wrote commentaries on the Bible. Passages have deliberately been chosen from all these different types of writing.

Introductory material and annotation has been kept to a minimum. There is a short introduction to each section, placing the extracts that follow in their particular context within the development of Christian thought. At the head of each passage we have indicated what edition of the text we have used in making the translation. Most of the translations are our own. Where we have used an existing translation, this has always been checked with the original and revised. Biblical references are given in the case of direct allusions. Notes have been restricted to three types: cases where in translation we have deviated from the the text being followed, points in argument

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09915-8 - Documents in Early Christian Thought

Edited by Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

which are likely to be obscure without some explanation, and significant cross-references to other passages translated in this book. It should be noted that biblical quotations are often given by patristic authors in a Greek or Latin version differing not only from the Hebrew but also from the usual text of the Septuagint and the Greek New Testament. Such deviations are explicitly referred to only in particularly unusual or puzzling cases.

We have not included any detailed account of the various writers or of the history and thought of the period. This is readily accessible elsewhere. For factual information about the Fathers and their writings, see B. Altaner, *Patrology* (Freiburg and London, 1960) or J. Quasten, *Patrology*, vols. I–III (Utrecht, 1950–60). For an outline of the history of the period see Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth, 1967) or W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church* (London 1965). For a general account of the doctrine of the period, see Maurice Wiles, *The Christian Fathers* (London, 1966), or, more fully, J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London, 1968<sup>4</sup>).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09915-8 - Documents in Early Christian Thought

Edited by Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

# I God

---

---

The conception of God is both the most fundamental and the most difficult part of any scheme of religious thought. The Fathers were heirs to two traditions – the anthropomorphic accounts of God’s loving activity in the Bible and the philosophical reflection on the changeless source of all being in Hellenistic thought. In the work of the Eastern Fathers in particular we see the interaction of these two traditions upon one another. The first four extracts chosen all come from the Eastern Church and illustrate that interaction.

Clement of Alexandria, writing towards the end of the second century, seeks to show how, on the one hand, poets and philosophers (above all Plato) and, on the other, Scripture point alike to the ineffability of God. In doing so he draws on the writings of Platonists of his own time. Origen held similar convictions, but the extensive nature of his expository and homiletic use of Scripture required him to work out their implications in more detail. The extract given here shows this concern leading him into an interesting discussion of the nature of religious language.

Basil’s letter belongs to a more directly polemical context. The later Arians had claimed that it was logically impossible for the same God to be both essentially unknowable and yet known in Christian revelation. Basil meets the objection by drawing a distinction between God’s essence and his attributes.

The passage from his brother Gregory of Nyssa shows the strongly religious character of this approach. Gregory, like his pagan Neoplatonist contemporaries, had a profoundly spiritual notion of the human intellect. Nevertheless, in his view the knowledge of God transcends not only the senses but even the intellect itself. He uses the scriptural story of Moses meeting with God in the darkness of Mount Sinai and develops the paradoxical notion of the vision of God in darkness.

In the final passage of this section, we see another form of the interweaving of the languages of devotion and of philosophical reflection. Augustine too was deeply influenced by Neoplatonism. As he expounds the praises of God in the Psalms,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09915-8 - Documents in Early Christian Thought

Edited by Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*God*

regularly used in the worship of the Church, he reflects on the relation between God who is absolute goodness and being in himself and the created goods that he has made.

I Clement of Alexandria  
*Miscellanies* 5, xii, 78–82  
 [GCS 15, 377–81]

78. ‘To discover the father and maker of this universe is a hard task; and having discovered him it is impossible to declare him to all men . . . for it is something which cannot be expressed in words like other subjects of knowledge.’\* So says Plato, that lover of truth. He had clearly heard how the most wise Moses when going up into the mountain (going up, that is, to the highest point of the intelligible order for holy contemplation) had to give orders that the whole people were not to go up with him. And when Scripture says, ‘Moses entered the darkness where God was’ [Exod. 20: 21], † that is an indication for those able to grasp it that God is both invisible and ineffable, and that the unbelief and ignorance of the majority of mankind is indeed a darkness obstructing the passage of the light-rays of the truth. Orpheus too, that teacher about God, drew on the same source. After saying: ‘There is One, complete in himself, and from this One everything is derived’ (or ‘born’, which is an alternative reading), he continues: ‘No mortal has seen him but he himself sees all men’; and more explicitly still: ‘Him I do not see; around him a cloud is fixed. For mortal men have only little mortal pupils in their eyes, natural growths of flesh and bone.’ ‡

79. The apostle provides us with a further witness when he says ‘I know a man in Christ caught up into the third heaven’ and from there ‘to Paradise, who heard ineffable words which man has no power to speak’ [2 Cor. 12: 2, 4]. This is his way of indicating the ineffability of God; when he uses the words ‘no power’ he is not

\* Plato, *Timaeus* 28C; *Epistle* vii 341C. Clement also combines these two quotations in *Protrepticus* vi, 68, 1. Both were standard quotations, much used in the contemporary Middle Platonism. See J. Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture* (ET London and Philadelphia, 1973), pp. 108–14.

† For a fuller development of this interpretation of Moses’ ascent of Mount Sinai, see Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, pp. 12–17 below.

‡ Orpheus, fragment 5, 9–11; 15–17 (ed. E. Abel, *Orphica* [Leipzig and Prague, 1885], p. 146).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09915-8 - Documents in Early Christian Thought

Edited by Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Clement of Alexandria*

referring to any law or fear of disobeying some command but is declaring that it is not within human capacity to give expression to the divine, even though such expression may quite properly begin to be possible beyond the third heaven on the part of those whose task is to instruct elect souls in the higher mysteries there. I know a passage where Plato also considers the question of a multiplicity of heavens. (My plan in this writing is, as I undertook at the beginning, to defer the many examples that could be drawn from non-Greek teaching to an appropriate point later on.) In the *Timaeus* the problem is raised whether one should think of many worlds or just this one – the exact terms are not significant as ‘world’ and ‘heaven’ are treated as synonymous – and the text reads: ‘Have we been right to talk of one heaven or would it have been more correct to speak of many, countless heavens? We must say one, if we are to hold that it was made in accordance with its pattern.’\*

80. And in the epistle of the Romans to the Corinthians we also read of ‘the ocean which no man can pass and the worlds beyond it’. †

In similar vein the noble apostle speaks of ‘the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God’ [Rom. 11: 33]. Was this not also the prophet’s hidden meaning when he ordered the making of unleavened ‘griddle’ cakes [Exod. 12: 39]? ‡ Was that not an indication that the truly sacred and mystic word about the unbegotten and his powers needed to be hidden in ‘riddles’? This is confirmed by what the apostle explicitly says in his letter to the Corinthians: ‘We speak wisdom among the perfect, not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age who are passing way – but we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the wisdom which is hidden’ [1 Cor. 2: 6–7]. Elsewhere he speaks of the ‘knowledge of the mystery of God in Christ in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden’ [Col. 2: 2–3].

This is still further confirmed by the words of our Saviour himself: ‘To you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of heaven’ [Matt. 13: 11]. Again the gospel declares that our Saviour spoke the word to the apostles in a mystery; for it is of him that the prophecy says: ‘He will open his mouth in parables and will utter things that from the beginning of the world have been hidden’ [Matt. 13: 35 (Ps. 78: 2)]. And then the Lord himself indicates concealment by means of the parable of the leaven: ‘The kingdom of heaven’, he says, ‘is like leaven which a woman took and hid in

\* *Timaeus* 31 A. † 1 Clement 20, 8.

‡ Clement plays on the word *ἐγκρυφίας* as Philo had done (*de Sacr. Ab. et Caini* 60).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09915-8 - Documents in Early Christian Thought

Edited by Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*God*

three measures of meal until the whole was leavened' [Matt. 13: 33]. This indicates either that the tripartite soul achieves the saving way of obedience through the spiritual power hidden in it by faith or that the strong and effective power of the word which has been granted to us draws to itself in a hidden and invisible way anyone who accepts it and takes it into his own being, and brings all aspects of his life into unity.

81. Solon thus said very profoundly of God: 'It is very hard to grasp the invisible measure of the mind, which alone possesses the ultimate bounds of all things.\* For, in the words of the poet of Agrigentum, the divine 'cannot be approached with our eyes or grasped with our hands – and that is the greatest way of persuasion leading to the minds of men.'†

Again John the apostle writes: 'No one has seen God at any time; the only-begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him' [John 1: 18]. He uses the name 'bosom' of God to refer to his invisibility and ineffability; for this reason some people have used the name 'depth' to indicate that he is inaccessible and incomprehensible but embraces and enfolds all things.‡

This is the hardest part of the discussion about God. The first cause of anything is hard to discover. It is therefore particularly hard to describe the first and original cause, which is the source of the existence of everything else which is or has been. For how is one to speak about that which is neither a genus nor a differentia nor a species nor an individuality nor a number – in other words which is neither any kind of accidental property nor the subject of any accidental property? Nor can one properly speak of him as a 'whole', for a whole is a matter of size and he is 'Father of the whole universe'. Nor can one speak of him as having parts, for that which is 'One' is indivisible and therefore also infinite – infinite not in the sense of measureless extension but in the sense of being without dimensions or boundaries [82], and therefore without shape or name. §

\* Solon, fragment 16 (ed. E. Diehl, *Anthologia Lyrica Graeca* [3rd edition, Leipzig, 1949], 1, 37).

† Empedocles, fragment 133 (ed. H. Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* [7th edition, Berlin, 1954], 1, 365).

‡ 'Bythos' or 'depth' is the name of the primary aion in Valentinian Gnosticism with which Clement was familiar. See Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1, 1, 1.

§ Albinus, *Epitome* 10, 4, has striking similarities to this passage and Clement may be dependent on it. At the very least it shows how very close he was to the Middle Platonist tradition with its use of Aristotelian categories within a Platonist framework.

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-09915-8 - Documents in Early Christian Thought  
 Edited by Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

### *Origen*

If we do give it a name, we cannot do so in the strict sense of the word: whether we call it ‘One’, ‘the good’, ‘mind’, ‘absolute being’, ‘Father’, ‘God’, ‘Creator’, or ‘Lord’, it is not a case of producing its actual name; in our *impasse* we avail ourselves of certain good names so that the mind may have the support of those names and not be led astray in other directions. For taken individually none of these names is expressive of God but taken together they collectively point to the power of the Almighty.

Ordinarily names given are derived either from the properties of things themselves or from their mutual relations; but neither of these can be applied to God. Nor is the demonstrative reason any more help, because this always rests on prior and better known facts and there is nothing prior to the Unbegotten. So it remains that we can only apprehend the unknown by divine grace and by the Word that proceeds from him. This is just what Luke in the Acts of the Apostles records Paul as saying: ‘Men of Athens, I see that you are in all things scrupulously religious. For going around and looking at your altars, I found an altar with this inscription: “To God unknown”. He whom you worship in ignorance is the one whom I am declaring to you’ [Acts 17: 22–3].

## 2 Origen

*Homilies on Jeremiah 18, 6 (on Jeremiah 18: 7–10)*  
 [GCS 6, 157–60]

‘An end\* will I declare concerning a nation or even a kingdom.’

The text appears to speak of an end without any qualification. But in fact it does say what kind of an end. The ‘end’ which ‘I will declare concerning a nation or kingdom’ is of this kind: to the first nation the end that is spoken is ‘I will overthrow you’ and to the second nation it is ‘I will build you up’. And again to the first group it is said ‘I will root you out’ and to the second group ‘I will plant you’. Does the fact that the end has been spoken mean that that end must happen? God who is not one who changes his mind or repents is said by Scripture to do so. Let us look carefully at this passage to see if we can explain in what way these things are said there and so accept the saying.

The text reads: ‘An end will I declare concerning a nation or a

\* πέρως in the LXX is presumably intended to be understood adverbially (as עַד in the Hebrew) but is treated by Origen as a noun.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09915-8 - Documents in Early Christian Thought

Edited by Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*God*

kingdom to remove them and to destroy them; but if that nation turns away from those evils of which I have spoken concerning it, I also will repent of the evils which I had intended to do to them. And an end will I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom to build it up or plant it; but if they act wickedly in my sight, not obeying my voice, I also will repent of the good things that I said I would do to them.'

'The repentance of God' demands some explanation from us. Repenting seems to be something reprehensible and unworthy, not merely in the case of God but even in that of a wise man. I do not envisage a wise man repenting, because in the customary meaning of the term, one who repents does so where his previous decisions have been badly made. But God, who foreknows the future, cannot have made bad decisions and repent on that score.

I have not yet shown the way in which Scripture introduces God as saying 'I will repent'. It does so in the book of Kings, where it is stated 'I repent that I anointed Saul as king' [1 Sam. 15: 11]. It is also said of him in general terms 'and repenting of the evil' [Joel 2: 13].

Consider the general teaching we are given about God. 'God is not like a man that he should be deceived nor like a son of man that he should be moved by threats' [Num. 23: 19] – from this passage we learn that God is not like a man. But there are other passages which claim that God is like a man – 'the Lord your God disciplined you as a man disciplines his son' [Deut. 8: 5] and 'he bore your ways as a man does with his son' [Deut. 1: 31]. Thus when the Scriptures are speaking about God as he is in himself and are not concerned with his involvement in the affairs of men, they say that he is not like a man; for example, 'there is no end of his greatness' [Ps. 145: 3], 'he is to be feared above all gods' [Ps. 96: 4] and 'praise him, all God's angels, praise him all his powers, praise him sun and moon, praise him all stars and light' [Ps. 148: 2–3]. And you could find thousands of other examples from the holy Scriptures which would illustrate the principle that 'God is not like a man'.

But when it is a matter of that dispensation by which God is involved with the affairs of men, then he takes on the mind, the ways and the speech of a man. When we talk to a two-year-old, we use baby language for the child's sake, because if we were to keep to proper adult speech and talk to children without coming down to their way of speaking they would not be able to understand. Imagine something very like that to be true in the case of God when he has dealings with the human race, and especially with those



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09915-8 - Documents in Early Christian Thought

Edited by Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Origen*

who are still infants. Observe how we adults even change the names of things in speaking to very small children. We give 'bread' a different name in talking to them and we have a special word to refer to 'drink'. We do not use the adult language we use in speaking to our peers, but a different childish or babyish form of speech. In referring to clothes with children, we give them different names, making up some sort of childish name for them. Does that mean that we are not grown-up? If anyone were to hear us talking to children, would they say 'that old man has gone out of his mind' or 'that man has forgotten his beard, forgotten how old he is'? Or is it accepted that one needs to adapt oneself in communicating with a child and therefore does not use the language of the elderly or of the fully grown but that of the child? God too is speaking to children – 'Behold, I and the children whom God has given me' [Isa. 8: 18; Heb. 2: 13] is what the Saviour says. One might say to an old man speaking to a child in a childish manner (or – to put the point more forcefully – in a babyish manner) that 'you have borne the ways of your son, you have borne the ways of a baby and have adopted his condition'. It is in this sense that you should understand Scripture also when it says: 'The Lord your God bore your ways as a man might bear the ways of his son' [Deut. 1: 31]. It seems that those who translated from the Hebrew did not find a word readily available in Greek and therefore coined one as they did in several other places too, and wrote 'the Lord your God bore your ways as a man might bear the ways of his son' (as in the example I have just given).\*

So since we repent, God addresses us as people who repent and says 'I repent'. When he threatens us he acts as if he had no foreknowledge; he addresses us like little children and threatens us. He acts as if he did not foreknow 'everything before it happens' [Susanna 42], but acting the part of a little child, if I may so put it, pretends that he does not know the future. He threatens a nation for its sins and says 'If the nation repents, I will also repent'. God, did you not know when you made the threat whether or not the nation would repent? Did you not know, when you made the promise, whether or not the man or nation to whom the word was directed would remain worthy of receiving the promises? But God acts as if he did not.

You can find many examples of a similarly human kind in Scripture.

\* The usual LXX reading has the word τροφοφορέω, meaning 'to provide nourishment' or 'to sustain'. Origen reads τροποφορέω, which means 'to bear someone's ways' in the sense of 'to put up with his manners', but can easily be given a secondary sense of 'to adopt someone's ways'.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09915-8 - Documents in Early Christian Thought

Edited by Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*God*

In the passage: ‘Speak to the children of Israel; perhaps they will hear and will repent’ [Jer. 26: 2–3 (LXX 33: 2–3)], God does not say, ‘perhaps they will hear’, as if he were in doubt about it. God is never in doubt and that cannot be the reason for his saying ‘perhaps they will hear and will repent’; the reason is to make your freedom of choice stand out as clearly as possible and to prevent your saying: ‘If he foreknows my loss then I am bound to be lost and if he foreknows my salvation then I am quite certain to be saved’. Thus he acts as if he did not know the future in your case, in order to preserve your freedom of choice by not anticipating or foreknowing whether you will repent or not. So he says to the prophet: ‘Speak; perhaps they will repent’.

You will find many more similar examples of God bearing the ways of man. If you hear of God’s anger and his wrath, do not think of wrath and anger as emotions experienced by God. Accommodations of the use of language like that are designed for the correction and improvement of the little child. We too put on a severe face for children not because that is our true feeling but because we are accommodating ourselves to their level. If we let our kindly feelings towards the child show in our face and allow our affection for it to be clearly seen, if we don’t distort our real selves and make some sort of change for the purpose of its correction, we spoil the child and make it worse. So God is said to be wrathful and declares that he is angry in order that you may be corrected and improved. But God is not really wrathful or angry. Yet you will experience the effects of wrath and anger, through finding yourself in trouble that can scarcely be borne on account of your wickedness, when you are being disciplined by the so-called wrath of God.

## 3 Basil

*Letter 234*[Ed. Y. Courtonne, *Saint Basile: Lettres* (Paris, 1957–66), 3, 41–4]

1. ‘Do you worship what you know or what you do not know?’ If we answer ‘We worship something that we know’, they retort immediately, ‘What is the essence of what you worship?’ Then, if we admit that we do not know its essence, they turn round and say, ‘Then you worship what you do not know.’ Our answer to this is that the word ‘to know’ has a variety of meanings. For what we say we know is God’s greatness, his power, his wisdom, his goodness, his providential care for us, and the justice of his judgement; but