

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69708-9 - Apollinarianism: An Essay on the Christology of the Early Church

Charles E. Raven

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTOLOGY

CHRISTIANITY is fundamentally an experience of communion with God in Christ and of fellowship in Him, an experience which led His disciples from the first to claim that Jesus was for them and for mankind God and Lord¹. It is primarily a matter of the spirit, not of the brain-cells. Yet from the first it was inevitable that the Christian missionary in vindicating the faith that was in him should undertake to interpret it, and however simple the categories in which he did so the result is after some sort a Christology. "How can these things be?" was the natural question of every intelligent hearer; and if it was to be answered the reply must be adapted to the needs and peculiarities of the enquirer. Few pictures of early Christendom are more wildly inaccurate than that which imagines the Apostles as starting upon their work equipped with a precise system of theological dogma, a complete and consistent tradition containing in itself the rudiments of all later developments. If we can free ourselves from the besetting tendency to read back into the past the formularies and conventions established by centuries of patient experiment, we shall recognise that these results were reached by a process of evolution. They are the survivals from a multitude of conjectures framed in the

¹ It was speedily crystallised into membership in a society: but even Battifol admits that the unity of Christians is "based directly and solely on faith in Christ and His supernatural life in us" (*Primitive Catholicism*, p. 64).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69708-9 - Apollinarianism: An Essay on the Christology of the Early Church

Charles E. Raven

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTOLOGY

face of existing difficulties and in the light of a variety of rival religions and philosophies. The Christian evangelist did not shut himself up in his study and receive there a perfect solution of all his problems: he met his would-be convert in the rough-and-tumble of argument, striving to convince him that what at first seemed a mockery and a stumbling-block was in fact congruous with the ideas and satisfying to the needs of humanity. Prophet or lawgiver, sage or wonder-worker, demon or demigod, in all of these classes he attempted at one time or another to classify his Lord, borrowing from the minds of his neighbours analogies by which to explain Him to them.

It is possible that in so doing Christians fell at once into error. Christ had declared that “no man knoweth the Father save the Son and he to whom the Son willeth to reveal Him”: and one of the greatest of His followers had endorsed the claim and warned his fellows that while “no man hath seen God at any time,” yet “he that hath seen the Son hath seen the Father.” If the early Church had realised the full meaning of such words, she would perhaps have been less ready to interpret Christ in terms of previous and non-Christian conceptions of God and would have escaped the errors which sprang from her employment of the Hellenic Absolute, Changeless and Infinite, as her definition of deity. She would have concentrated her attention upon Jesus as did the Fourth Evangelist and, accepting the revelation in Him as the key to the mystery, have been initiated through Him and Him alone into the knowledge of the Godhead as Love and Light and Life. To do so, however, would have been to raise up insurmountable barriers against the spreading of the gospel.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69708-9 - Apollinarianism: An Essay on the Christology of the Early Church

Charles E. Raven

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTOLOGY 3

Only by accepting contemporary opinions and employing recognised ideas and language could the Christian secure a common ground for the discussion of his faith. He had to become all things to all men if he were to win them; and when in consequence he was tempted rather to read into Jesus a pagan notion of the divine than to explore the nature of God and man as seen in Him, such a concession to past beliefs was a necessary step in the evolution of Christianity if all aspects of truth were to be united and all the kingdoms of the earth enrolled in the service of God and of His Christ. Grievous as have been the mistakes into which she was led, pathetic as are her wanderings in blind alleys and side paths, we need not lament that the Church was challenged from the first to make her faith plain, nor that her doctors were swift to take up the task. That there was a general agreement on a few facts of history and on the quality of a common experience corroborative of and explicable by those facts is plain enough. The New Testament itself demonstrates how variously the revelation could be interpreted and how individual and empirical were the moral and theological deductions from it. The central message was simple: cultus and organisation, creed and philosophy, grew slowly and with countless ramifications¹. Only time could prove which branches bore leaves for the healing of the

¹ Their fixation probably occurred in this order; certainly the development of the ordered society was much more rapid than that of doctrine: ecclesiology was settled before theology. The evolution of Catholicism on its institutional side lies beyond the scope of this book: and what is stated here refers only to the growth of Christology. It is noteworthy that Battifol whose *Primitive Catholicism* is the most learned and detailed answer to Söhm, Harnack and A. Sabatier, says nothing on our subject and very little on any doctrine except that of the Church.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69708-9 - Apollinarianism: An Essay on the Christology of the Early Church

Charles E. Raven

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTOLOGY

nations. For many a vigorous bough, then as now, suddenly revealed the corruption latent at its heart: many were cut down, some impatiently and perhaps prematurely: others, equally rotten, were saved and nursed back into a show of vitality. So the seed which Jesus had sown germinated and expanded into a tree. Bergson's famous description¹ of the progress of life, often thwarted and checked, often side-tracked and frustrated, yet ever rallying from a setback, and ever discovering new paths by which to accomplish its end and to subjugate matter to its sway, is a faithful picture of the march of the Spirit as seen in the history of Christian doctrine. And there could be no other way.

So it was that, having no authoritative statement of their beliefs ready to hand and indeed knowing no earthly guide which could supply what was needed, the infant Church set to work to formulate her faith in such terms as should harmonise it with the particular preconceptions, outlook and temperament of her converts. Each nationality, almost each individual, has at first a peculiar solution to offer. The prophetic tradition of the Jews and their familiarity with the inspired saints of the Old Testament, which expressed themselves in the humanistic ideas of the Ebionites; the esoteric imaginings of Eastern theosophists which are so crudely materialised and misrepresented by the orthodox opponents of Gnosticism; the legal precision of the Latins which appears in the terse phrases of the old Roman creed; the philosophic genius of the Greeks which soon raised them to the position of the recognised theologians of Christendom; these are the chief forms in which the early "liberty of prophesying" revealed itself. The long

¹ *Creative Evolution*, pp. 267–8.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69708-9 - Apollinarianism: An Essay on the Christology of the Early Church

Charles E. Raven

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTOLOGY 5

catalogue of heretical sects, that “viper brood of Satan and Simon Magus his firstborn,” gives us an idea of the fertility of invention lavished upon the subject. In every new field of human enquiry there must always be a period of groping, wherein the wildest and most grotesque fancies are tolerated through lack of any systematic knowledge of the points at issue or any recognised process of exact investigation. The present position of the study of psychic phenomena supplies a parallel to that of Christian theology in the second century. No one clearly knew what was the scope of legitimate enquiry: no one could readily separate genuine deduction from plausible guesswork: no one could foresee which of the many temples erected in honour of the Nazarene was founded upon the rock. Parthians and Medes and Elamites, strangers from Rome, Jews and proselytes, all had striven to tell in their own tongues this wonderful work of God; and the result was much more like Babel than Pentecost.

This state of chaos is by no means faithfully mirrored in the literary remains of the time; for with few exceptions those alone have survived which commended themselves to the orthodox of later centuries. And the superficial student of doctrine may easily obtain a wholly false impression. For to him the Church of the Synagogue, the sects of Ophites, of Valentinus and Basilides, Marcion and the Montanists, the authors of the apocryphal gospels and of the Clementine literature are mere shadows to be classified and docketed and dismissed as unimportant. Looking back upon the period, he sees little except the triumphant succession of the Greek Apologists and imagines their work to be the expression of the *communis sensus fidelium*. In reality,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69708-9 - Apollinarianism: An Essay on the Christology of the Early Church

Charles E. Raven

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTOLOGY

of course, such a picture is purely fictitious. A contemporary would have seen a number of isolated pioneers gathering knots of disciples around them in their own neighbourhood, in some cases in communion with the churches of their own province, in others forming schismatic congregations of their own. Amid the welter of speculation he would have found it difficult to forecast what would be the lines of future development or even to discover which of these varying sects represented the true faith most adequately. For although the majority of Christians were no doubt uninfluenced by experiments in doctrine and united rather by membership in the Church than by agreement in reasoned belief, this was due rather to a lack of interest in theology than to the possession of fixed formularies or definite knowledge. Even at Rome where the desire for order and uniformity early showed itself, a study of the pontificates of Victor or of Callistus ought to warn us against assuming any large fixity of dogma. And the failure of Hippolytus proves that as yet there was no general recognition of the Logos-theology which he championed and which for the catholicism of the East was alone to survive out of all the tangle of the time.

To justify this picture of the evolution of formulated doctrine in the second century we need only refer to the works of its greatest figure, the link between East and West, Irenaeus. Alarmed by the variety and novelty of the speculations which were threatening to conceal or drain dry the main channel by diverting its flow into a hundred wandering rivulets, the great bishop set himself to examine these experiments in irrigation and to test their power to supply the water of Life. Did they derive from the true source? Did they transmit the true

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69708-9 - Apollinarianism: An Essay on the Christology of the Early Church

Charles E. Raven

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTOLOGY 7

current? Were the fruits produced under their influence worthy of the Lord's garden? He had no elaborate apparatus for his work. But he knew what Christ meant to him; and he had a simple rule by which the conditions essential for the Christian experience were summarised, and the Bible and especially the Gospels which he recognised as normative, and the memory of his teachers in the faith and above all the authority of his position as an official representative of an organised and world-wide community. In other respects, too, he was a learned man, though inferior in intellectual power and speculative ability to the great Gnostics whom he attacked. But he had commonsense and that instinct for truth which is an accompaniment of saintliness and counts for far more than brilliant brains or vivid imagination. And so, though much of his work is blundering and confused, and much, if judged by later standards, is defective to the verge of heterodoxy, no Christian of his time has a surer grasp of fundamentals, or more faithfully expresses the convictions of believers, or more often anticipates in phrases of startling insight the conclusions of succeeding ages¹. Yet, for all his appeal to authority, he too is a pioneer so far as theology is concerned²; and it is his hold upon Christ, not the

¹ Christology does not loom large in his thought, and is nowhere clearly worked out. *Haer.* iii. especially 19, and v. 1, contain his ideas. Adam was made of flesh and soul and capable of receiving Spirit, that is, perfection and unity with God. His fall destroyed this possibility. Christ is man united with God, flesh, soul and Spirit. He thus restored to man the possibility of perfection, spiritual life or adoption.

² The bulk of his argument is ecclesiastical, and he is more successful in denouncing the presumption of the Gnostics than in expounding an answer to their problems. Whether he was also a pioneer in ecclesiology is a question into which it would be irrelevant to enter here: cf., amongst others, Harnack, *H.D.* II. 67-71; Battifol, *Primitive Catholicism*, pp. 198-217.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69708-9 - Apollinarianism: An Essay on the Christology of the Early Church

Charles E. Raven

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTOLOGY

existence of a precise and elaborate tradition, that guides him on his way.

It is neither possible nor for us necessary to describe the various interpretations of the fact of Christ propounded in that period of untrammelled conjecture. They were driven from the Church and their authors are in most cases mere names. How much Christendom has been impoverished by their wholesale rejection we can only estimate from our knowledge of the repeated attempts from age to age to restate their positions, and from our experience of the limitations of the Greek theology which was their successful rival. But deplore their loss as we may, it is evident that for the Western world at that time the Greeks preserved and explained the fundamentals of Christianity far more appropriately than Ebionites or Gnostics. Their presentation showed itself capable of winning men to Christ, of perpetuating the fact of salvation in Him, and of developing into a philosophy adequate to the conscience and intellect of the churches of the Empire. From their influence upon later generations and their relationship to Apollinarius it is important for us to consider their characteristic tenets and the work of the great thinkers who are his spiritual forefathers.

When the earliest Christians were trying to translate the content of their belief into language intelligible to Gentile audiences, the first requisite was a formula which should express the relationship of the Godhead manifest in Jesus to that of the Supreme Being whom He had called Father. Their choice was somewhat limited: for to speak of Him as God was insufficient and misleading, while to adopt His own title of Son would suggest the popular polytheism and the gross

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69708-9 - Apollinarianism: An Essay on the Christology of the Early Church

Charles E. Raven

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTOLOGY 9

fables of Olympus. Messiah or Christ soon became a name rather than a description: "prophet" failed to do justice to His Godhead; "aeon" to His Manhood. The initial advantage of His Greek converts was largely due to the fact that for them alone a term existed which was not only singularly appropriate in itself but had already been employed to interpret the religion of Israel to the students of the philosophy of Hellenism. This was, of course, the term "Word" or Logos.

The Memra or Word of the Lord was familiar to every reader of the Old Testament, and in the later Wisdom literature had been practically personified as the intermediary between God and man, the agent of the divine self-revelation in the world. Philo had already made frequent use of it in his attempt to commend Judaism in the guise of a religious philosophy to the Greeks of Alexandria; and though, when speaking strictly, he treats it only as a function or attribute of the one God, he frequently uses language which taken alone would imply that the Word was a personal being distinct from and the cosmic representative of Jehovah¹. For like most later Jews he found himself forced both by the growth of reverence and by the general tendency towards deism to introduce the conception of a mediating power or powers between the world and the remote, changeless and undefinable deity. The "thrones, dominations, principedoms, virtues, powers" of the Rabbis were conveniently summed up in the Logos of

¹ For a full treatment of Philo's usage cf. Soulier, *La doctrine du Logos chez Philo d'Alexandrie*, and, more recently, Lebreton, *Origines du dogme de la Trinité*, pp. 183-205. There are in Philo three passages in which the Logos is called God, *θεός* or *δέυτερος θεός*, *De Somn.* i. 229; *Leg. alleg.* iii. 207; and a fragment on Genesis in Eusebius, *Praepar. Evang.* vii. 13.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69708-9 - Apollinarianism: An Essay on the Christology of the Early Church

Charles E. Raven

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTOLOGY

the Hellenists; and it is not surprising that the Fourth Evangelist, writing in Greek for an universal church, should apply the same term to the pre-existent divine being who became flesh and dwelt among us, or that the "Word" should speedily be adopted into the dogmatic of the early Church.

Indeed, the motives which influenced Philo would make "Logos" equally serviceable to Christians in their very similar task. For, besides being a translation of Memra in the sense of the Spoken Word of God, it also bears the meaning of the rational principle in man and the universe, and thus is brought into harmony with the fundamental tenets of Greek philosophy in general and with the phraseology of the most important contemporary sect in particular. The belief that the reason or intelligence, which separates man from the irrational animals, is also the element in his nature whereby he can mount from the delusions of the phenomenal to the knowledge of the actual and eternal, is accepted in practice by all thinkers and is the theme of Plato's highest rhapsodies. But in Stoicism the term Logos was itself employed to describe the sum of those forces by whose agency the order of the whole and of its parts is maintained, in whose laws is found the ultimate authority for nature and for man, and which is at once the source and the ground of all existence: it thus bore for Stoicism a meaning almost coextensive with that which it bore for Judaism¹: so far as such materialists could use the thought of God, He was to them the

¹ The question of the relationship of Stoicism to Judaism is one of great interest, but lies outside our scope. Whatever the debt of Stoic ethics to the Law or of the Wisdom literature to Hellenism, the conceptions of the Word of the Lord in Ezekiel and of the Logos in Heraclitus are clearly independent.