

PAUL OF SAMOSATA'S VIEW OF INCARNATION AND THE ARISTOTELIAN AND JEWISH IDEAS THAT MAY HAVE INFLUENCED IT

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Paul of Samosata's view of the Incarnation of the *logos* seems to have been essentially one of inspiration, that is, similar to the idea of the "inner man" being transformed by God through His Spirit. It also appears that this understanding may have been influenced both by the thought of Aristotle and possibly also by Ebionite Judaism or even the normative Judaism of the day, with their more subordinationist ideas of what the Messiah was to be. Undoubtedly there were other influences as well,¹ but I will focus on these two.

I will attempt to detail Paul's incarnational understanding, partly from his own sayings² and partly from those of his opponents. In part I want to show just *when* Jesus became "unique" for Paul: Was it at his baptism or before, such as at his birth? I will then attempt to show that there may have been Aristotelian thought that influenced his view of Christ, particularly in the ethical area. I will then suggest that there may have been Judaistic underpinnings to his understanding, largely due to the greater ongoing historical Jewish presence in Syria than in other areas where Christianity had spread.

¹ Charles Raven suggests that the problems with Gnosticism were more keenly felt in the Syrian churches and so grew a suspicion against attempts to spiritualize the gospel or make Christianity a field for speculation (*Apollinarianism: An Essay on the Christology of the Early Church*, Cambridge University Press, 1923, 44-45).

² It is disputed whether these Greek fragments of Paul are even genuine. Harnack (in *History of Dogma*; see fn. 4), Loofs (*Paulus von Samosata*; fn. 3), Raven (*Apollinarianism*; fn. 1), and others accept their genuineness. R. Sample on the other hand doubts the authenticity of at least some of them ("The Christology of the Council of Antioch (268 C.E.) Reconsidered," *Church History*, April 1984, Vol. 48, 18-26).

Paul's Incarnational Understanding

Church historians have labeled Paul's Christology as "adoptionist."³ This is largely because he understood the logos of John 1 as "impersonal." His opponents understood him to believe that the "Son" was in God "as a word [λόγος] is in a man."⁴ Since it can be argued that most would not say that there is another personality inside one's self, Paul's reasoning effectively shuts out a distinct personality or "hypostasis" for the logos.

Continuing with Paul's opponents' understanding of Paul's belief,⁵ there was in Paul's thinking indeed a union between the man Jesus and the logos. But the logos — also seemingly equated with Wisdom and the Spirit at times in Paul's thought⁶ — inspired Jesus "from above" (ἄνωθεν),⁷ as the prophets and Moses were inspired by God, but to a greater degree. And Paul did understand this as a true "indwelling" (ἐνοικήσαντα),⁸ where the logos was "at work from heaven in him" (ἐνεργῶν ἐξ οὐρανοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ).⁹ As Harnack puts it:

The Logos becomes that in Jesus which in the Christian is called by the Apostle "the inner man"; but the union which is thus originated is a contact in knowledge and communion (συνάφεια κατὰ μάθησιν καὶ μετουσίαν), a coming together (συνέλευσις);

³ This adoptionist Christology should be distinguished from the "Ebionite" form which saw the birth of Jesus as simply the result of a union between Joseph and Mary. A purported quotation of Paul's says "And this [man] the Virgin bore by the Holy Spirit" (in F. Loofs, *Paulus von Samosata: eine Untersuchung zur altkirchlichen Literatur und Dogmengeschichte*, Texte Und Untersuchungen, Leipzig, 1924, 334, Frag. 1, as cited in R.V. Sellers, *Two Ancient Christologies: A Study in the Christological Thought of the Schools of Alexandria and Antioch in the Early History of Christian Doctrine*, London: SPCK, 1954, 120). So Paul seems to have accepted that Jesus had a unique conception. More on this below.

⁴ Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma*, translated by Neil Buchanan, Dover Publications, 1961, Vol. II, 40. In fn. 2 Harnack quotes the Greek source, but unfortunately does not (as in many of his footnotes in this section) say exactly which of the many sources he lists in the previous footnote it is.

⁵ *Ibid.* Pages 40-41 begin with "The teaching of Paul was characterized by the Fathers as..." I am therefore assuming all of Harnack's citations from these pages through p. 41 fn. 9 (after which he appears to switch to fragments purported to be of Paul's own writings) are from those who would disagree with Paul.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 40, 41 fn. 2 and 7, where the Greek sources are quoted.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 40 fn. 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 41 fn. 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 41 fn. 2.

there does not arise a being existent in a body (οὐσία οὐσιωμένη ἐν σώματι), i.e., the Logos dwelt in Jesus not “in substance but in quality” (οὐσιώδω ἀλλὰ κατὰ ποιότητα).¹⁰

The Logos, then, remains distinct from Jesus.

Further, according to fragments purporting to be genuine statements of the Samosatene quoted by Charles Raven, Jesus was “conjoined by His virtue to God”; “By the changelessness of His disposition He was made like to God.”¹¹ Harnack even has Athanasius saying that Paul “agrees” that we can now call Jesus “God [born] of a virgin...God out of Nazareth” (Θεὸν ἐκ τῆς παρθένου ὁμολογεῖ Θεὸν ἐκ Ναζαρέτ).¹² So it could be wrong to say that we cannot find God in the Christ of Paul of Samosata’s understanding,¹³ even if it was not in the way that was becoming orthodox, i.e., that the Logos was an eternal entity with God that made up the personality of Jesus after becoming incarnate.

It could also be wrong to assume that this “brand” of incarnation¹⁴ was “only” a difference in degree of inspiration compared to Moses and the prophets. Another statement attributed to Paul by Loofs reads as follows: “But she brought forth a man like one of us [ἡμῖν ἴσον], though superior to us in every respect, since grace was upon him from the Holy Spirit, and from the promises, and from the things that are written.”¹⁵ Loofs says that Paul’s understanding here is that Jesus is “a direct creation of the Spirit from the very conception.”¹⁶ When put together with the statement attributed to Paul that “Mary received the Logos,”¹⁷ then Paul’s Christology might best be understood as “conceptional”¹⁸

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹¹ E.g., Raven, 52-53. Raven says these quotations are in a book generally called the *Doctrina de Verbi Incarnatione* which consists of extracts from the Fathers followed by several from the chief heretics. These fragments appear to be what Harnack (39) calls οἱ πρὸς Σαβίνου λόγοι (the words of Paul to Sabinus) and published in Greek by Mai (Script. Vet. Nov. Coll. VII, 68 sq.). They also appear to be what Loofs (cited within other works in this paper) is using.

¹² Harnack, 42 fn. 2.

¹³ Though it is possible — judging from Paul’s overall Christology — that this was an attempt by Paul to mollify his opponents.

¹⁴ It is understood that many would deny that Paul’s view of the union of the Logos with the man Jesus is a true incarnation at all.

¹⁵ Loofs, 331, Frag. 2, as cited in Sellers, 131.

¹⁶ Loofs, 254 f., as cited in Sellers, 131.

¹⁷ Sellers, 132.

¹⁸ Cf. Raymond Brown for his comments on Luke 1:35 in this vein (*The Birth of the Messiah*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977, 31 fn. 17, as cited in A.F.

rather than adoptionist, as “being adopted” is commonly understood. Paul seems determined to let Jesus be the unique human being from his conception that Matthew and Luke indicate he is, and is averse to any attempted understanding of the Logos of John 1 or of any other passage that could, on a surface reading, initially indicate something else.

But this is an unorthodox incarnational Christology that best fits with the idea of Jesus being “inspired” in the sense that all true Christians might be said to be inspired by God’s spirit, though in the case of Jesus to a much greater extent. Jesus remains human and is not “taken over” by a preexistent hypostasis. Raven explicitly states that Paul claimed that inspiration was in fact incarnation.¹⁹

Aristotelian Influences?

A good number of sources indicate that the originator of the dynamic monarchian view that Paul of Samosata held was a Byzantium leather merchant named Theodotus, who apparently brought the teaching to Rome in about 190.²⁰ Theodotus²¹ also taught a truly human, non-preexistent Jesus²² as Paul later would, but agreed with “orthodoxy” on the creation of the world, divine omnipotence and the virgin birth.²³ His followers were known for their interest in logic and geometry, fondness for constructing syllogisms,²⁴ and esteem for Aristotle.²⁵ They attempted to prove their points from Scripture using philological textual criticism,²⁶ as opposed to the more allegorical approach that became associated with

Buzzard and C.F. Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity's Self-Inflicted Wound*, International Scholars, 1998, 69).

¹⁹ Raven, 51.

²⁰ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, Harper & Brothers, 1958, 116; implied in Harnack, 25-35.

²¹ Much of the information about the Theodotians seems to come from a contemporary writing known as the *Little Labyrinth*, quoted by both Eusebius and Theodoret.

²² There is no evidence that Paul accepted the teaching of later Theodotians that Melchizedek actually stood higher than Christ as the actual mediator between God and man. Cf. K. Baus, *History of the Church, Vol. I. From the Apostolic Community to Constantine*, translated by Hubert Jedin, H. Jedin and J. Dolan, eds., The Seabury Press, 1980, translated from *Handbuch der Kirchengeschichte*, Verlag Herder, 1962, 255-256.

²³ *Ibid.*, citing Hippolytus, ref. 7, 35.

²⁴ Raven, 57.

²⁵ Baus, 255

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 255.

Origen and the Alexandrian school.²⁷ The Roman Bishop Victor expelled Theodotus from the ecclesiastical community.²⁸

Raven doubts that Paul picked up his Christological concepts from Theodotus, saying, "Both on general grounds and from the lack of proof of contact it seems vastly unlikely that the powerful and self-reliant patriarch of Antioch should have borrowed his ideas from unimportant and already condemned heretics, much less have attempted to revive their heresy."²⁹ Yet even he says, "Nevertheless it is certainly striking to find so curious a resemblance between the methods ascribed to the Theodotians and those of Paul."³⁰ And Raven lists a number of similarities between Paul's outlook and that of the Peripatetic school associated with Aristotle (which I will detail below).³¹

It appears that the Aristotelian influence on Paul's incarnational Christology can be seen at a basic level: The Aristotelian idea is more empirical or practical, while the Platonic way of thinking is metaphysical or idealistic. "Dynamic Monarchianism," as Baus puts it, "betrays a rationalistic attitude which found the idea of God's becoming man difficult to accept."³² Harnack says:

As [Paul] kept his dogmatic theology free from Platonism, his difference with his opponents began in his conception of God. The latter described the controversy very correctly, when they said that Paul "had betrayed the mystery of the Christian faith,"³³ *i.e.* the mystic conception of God and Christ due to natural philosophy...He...represented the interests of theism as against the chaotic naturalism of Platonism."³⁴

²⁷ Sellers refers to a "Greek culture which possessed a strong Aristotelian bias" in northern Syria during the first five centuries of the Christian era. It is in fact part of the Antiochene Christological tradition, which is a study of its own. Sellers says that the holders of the Syrian doctrinal tradition were "not idealists, but realists, taking as their basis the historical and empirical; to these the particular rather than the general makes its appeal; theirs is not so much the metaphysical as the ethical point of view" (108).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 255.

²⁹ Raven, 57. But this statement needs to be tempered with the general tenor of this essay which often appears to be an attempt to "rehabilitate" Paul. The next statement suggests that Raven has difficulty evading the connection between Theodotus and Paul.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

³² Baus, 255.

³³ Citing Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, VII, 30, 10.

³⁴ Harnack, 44-45.

It can be seen that Platonic concepts were probably more conducive to what became orthodox Christology. Plato's understanding of the unchanging and unseen "Being" which is universal and the true essential Reality that corresponds to the intellectual function of Ideas, as opposed to the "particulars" which are the sensible objects themselves,³⁵ would seem to work well with the Logos doctrine and its definition as the mental "Reason." The unseen Logos belonging to the Universal God could be seen as the "true" heavenly Being, while the human Jesus who results from the Incarnation would essentially be the less perfect "copy"; that is, we are not to "begin" our understanding of the Savior with the man Jesus, but with the Johannine Logos. Plato's well-known dichotomy of the soul that has immortality apart from the body, where the latter is a prison for the former, is also conducive to the idea of the True Being inhabiting a body.³⁶

Paul's starting point for his unorthodox Christology seems to have effectively been Aristotle's "particular" — the facts and objects we can experience — rather than Plato's "universal"; that is, Paul began with the "historical," which we might today associate more with the Jesus of the Synoptics, who could be seen, heard and otherwise experienced.

Paul, unlike the Alexandrians, finds his chief interest in the concrete and particular, not in the abstract and general, in the scientific analysis of human nature rather than in the metaphysical principles of which it may or may not be the embodiment, in the study of the facts of history and experience more than the eternal relationships by which those facts are to be interpreted.³⁷

Aristotle was concerned with the final purpose in everything. As Copleston puts it, "This formal principle realizes itself in the activity of the object...unfolds itself in matter, organizes, moulds and shapes matter tends towards an end, which is the adequate manifestation of the essence, of the 'idea,' in the phenomenon."³⁸ It seems that the *final expression* of the Logos in the man Jesus is the point at which the Samosatene feels we can finally consider the Logos truly personal. Sellers puts it this way: "[Paul's] Logos is not the Logos of philosophy: he does not, like his opponents, start with a Second God beside the Father. Rather, for

³⁵ Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy: Volume I, Greece and Rome*, Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1966, 373-374.

³⁶ I am not here claiming to know Paul of Samosata's view of anthropology, the human "soul," etc.

³⁷ Raven, 55.

³⁸ Copleston, 375.

him...the Logos is the λόγος ἐνδιάθετος,³⁹ 'immanent' in God, as reason is in man."⁴⁰ So — consciously or not — Paul may again have been reflecting Aristotelian thought.

Paul's Christology also seems to reflect Aristotle's tone in the area of ethics. In the following table, Raven gives translations from Aristotle's "Ethics of Nicomachea" and from the fragments purportedly of Paul to Sabinus⁴¹:

Aristotle	Paul of Samosata
<p>"It is by practicing goodness that we become good."⁴²</p> <p>"Activities exercised on any particular object develop the character correspondingly...Every sane person knows that habits of mind are formed by exercising activity in any direction."⁴³</p>	<p>"[Jesus] by conflict and toil overcame our inherited sin."</p> <p>"[Jesus] gained by his progressive performance of good deeds a unity and identity of will and energy with God."</p>
<p>"Equality and similarity, especially similarity in respect to virtue, are the ground of affection."⁴⁴</p>	<p>"Do not be surprised that the Saviour possessed unity of will with God...Nature reveals that in diversity there is an underlying unity and identity of essence, so the fixed habit of love effects in diversity a unity and identity of will, revealed by a unity and identity in objects of desire."</p>
<p>"Voluntary actions excite either praise or blame; involuntary only pardon or perhaps pity."⁴⁵</p>	<p>"What are controlled by the condition of their nature have in them nothing praiseworthy: what are controlled by the fixed habit of affection are highly to be praised."⁴⁶</p>

³⁹ Cites here *c. Apoll. ii. 3*; Loofs, 338, Frag. 2, and 248ff.

⁴⁰ Sellers, 119.

⁴¹ Raven, 52-56.

⁴² *Eth. Nic. ii. 1.4*, as cited in Raven, 55.

⁴³ *Eth. Nic. iii. 5.11,12*, as cited in Raven, 55.

⁴⁴ *Eth. Nic. viii. 8.5*, as cited in Raven, 55.

⁴⁵ *Eth. Nic. iii.1.1.*, as cited in Raven, 56.

⁴⁶ Raven simply refers to the "fragments" and then follows with the quotes above without specifying exactly which fragment each quote came from (52).

In comparing the statements from Aristotle with the corresponding statements from Paul, the similarity is hard to miss. This is particularly the case with the first and third set. The thoughts in the corresponding columns are certainly not identical, however; in the top right box, for instance, the first statement from Paul was preceded by his statement from the fragment that Jesus was “born holy and righteous.” Again, Paul understands that Jesus is unique from birth, not just from his baptism,⁴⁷ and it could not be suggested that Aristotle had anything like a supernatural conception of a human in mind that he felt he needed to incorporate into his ethical understandings. So Paul’s understanding of the supernatural conception of Jesus means that we cannot press the similarity between the ethical teaching of Aristotle and Paul’s Christological understanding too far.

Arguably, the most significant of the three sets is the third one, as it brings out in emphatic fashion the importance of Paul’s disagreement with his opponents on the incarnation. Paul just did not think there was “worth” in the idea of Jesus being the preexistent divine nature, a second hypostasis with God; at least not the worth of, instead, a human being expending the effort required to obtain the status that Jesus ultimately obtained. Of course, this belief cannot be *entirely* consistent with the fact that Paul did understand that Jesus had a unique conception, which would seem at the least to give Jesus a “head start” on the rest of humanity — a seeming lack of the usual level of human inclination to sin, apparently because he lacked a human father — even if Paul would not call that a different “nature.” Further, it could likely be argued from the more orthodox point of view that the union between the Logos and the man Jesus does imply some struggles Christ would experience as the divine and human natures came into conflict at times in his life. But to return to the main point, it seems undeniable that Paul’s view of the moral “growth” of Jesus had an affinity with Aristotle’s view of “voluntary actions” exciting praise.

Jewish Influences?

It is intriguing to think that there may have been some Jewish or Jewish-Christian influences on Paul. He seems to have had the title of

⁴⁷ Sellers (132 fn. 1) disagrees with the statement of Harnack (43) that Paul understood that “Jesus seems to have been Christ only from his baptism” on the basis of the statement from Λόγος πρὸς Σαβίνου “τῷ ἁγίῳ πνεύματι χρισθεὶς προσηγορεύθη Χριστός.” There is no reference to the time of this anointing, and Paul’s statements in regard to Jesus being unique from his birth would seem to make Harnack’s statement unsubstantiated.

Procurator Ducenarius⁴⁸ and was in the household of King Odenathus and after him his wife Zenobia during the brief kingdom of Palmyra.⁴⁹ Though it is unlikely Zenobia herself was Jewish by birth, it does appear that she had some Judaistic leanings.⁵⁰ There was also a predominance of, according to Millar, “Semitic cults” in Palmyra itself, and substantial evidence for a Jewish community there.⁵¹ Raven mentions that there were large numbers of Jewish colonies in Syria and that there was a close relationship between the Church and the Synagogue.⁵² Over 100 years after the Paul of Samosata controversy, John Chrysostom was, according to Raven, often “rebuking his flock for their visits to Jewish places of worship, observance of Jewish feasts and swearing of Jewish oaths,” a very different situation from that of Alexandria, where the Jews were essentially the foes of Christianity.⁵³ Finally, he was essentially called a Jew⁵⁴ and Raven cites Epiphanius and Chrysostom as calling that form of Christian theology so friendly to Judaism “the new Judaism.”⁵⁵

Even if no direct connection between the Ebionites, other Jewish Christians or Jews can be made to Paul,⁵⁶ with the early spread of the New Testament church in Syria (especially Antioch), where many of the first converts were Jews of the Diaspora, it is not a stretch to suggest that some Jewish influence remained. This was fertile and friendly ground for a Christology such as Paul's.

⁴⁸ Frederick W. Norris, “Paul of Samosata: Procurator Ducenarius,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 35, Pt. I, April 1984, 50. In this article he argues against the contention of Fergus Millar in his 1971 article that Paul's procuratorship is a “fantasy” where Paul simply *wished* to be called by that title rather than bishop (“Paul of Samosata, Zenobia and Aurelian: The Church, Local Culture and Political Allegiance in Third-Century Syria,” *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 61, 13).

⁴⁹ Raven, 47.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, and Millar, 13.

⁵¹ Millar, 5, 13.

⁵² Raven, 45.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, and Raven cites *Adv. Judaeos* (especially Or. ii.) and *Comm. In Ep. Ad Galat.* ii. for the Chrysostom statement.

⁵⁴ Sellers, 119.

⁵⁵ Raven, 45; he cites *Epiphanius, Haer.* Lxv. *passim*, and Chrysostom, *De verb. Apostl.*, etc.

⁵⁶ Even if it could be determined that Paul had a close relationship with Zenobia, she apparently did not become prominent until after the death of her husband in 267/8, several years after the first accusations of heresy directed at Paul.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it appears that Paul's incarnational Christology was strongly influenced by the logic of Aristotelianism — especially as it was opposed to the more mystical Platonic understanding — and it found in Syria good soil with its more Semitic-Jewish culture. It seems likely that Paul would have just said — as so many of us would today — that he got his view from the Scriptures.⁵⁷ But it was obviously not enough to convince the representatives of the growing orthodox position that his Christology sufficiently represented the Deity of the Lord Jesus.

⁵⁷ Harnack says that Paul supported his views by “copious proofs from the Scriptures” (43). It is not clear what exactly made up the canon in Antioch or Syria in Paul's day, but there do not seem to have been any disputes as to the Scriptures both sides were using as their “proof texts.”