

# The Making of the Creeds

Oskar Skarsaune\*

Some evangelical Christians and some Jewish Believers think the creeds—the “Apostolic” and the “Nicene”—are superfluous, maybe even misleading or harmful. Why add something to Scripture? Aren't the creeds part of that Church tradition which men have added to Scripture, and which they tend to regard as even more authoritative than Scripture? If so—let's do away with them!

In this article I am going to argue that a closer acquaintance with the historical origin of the creeds may bring even a staunch supporter of the Bible-only position—such as myself—to a greater appreciation of their meaning and function.

## Confessing and Baptism

In the apostolic period, when a person requested to be baptized, we have good reason to believe that he/she was asked: Do you believe Jesus to be the Messiah/the Son of God? We have indications of this in the so-called “Western” text of Acts 8:36f (see the notes in any modern Bible). In the beginning, almost all baptismal candidates were Jewish or converts to Judaism, and faith in Jesus was all that was asked for. When the baptizand had confessed his/her faith in Jesus as the Messiah/the Son of God, and following this confession had been baptized, he or she were said to have been baptized “in(to) the Name of the Lord/Messiah Jesus” (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5; cp. also 1 Cor 1:13,15; 6:11).<sup>46</sup>

When the preaching of the gospel was taken to the gentiles, biblical monotheism could no longer be taken for granted among the baptismal candidates. It was not enough to ascertain that they believed Jesus to be Lord/Messiah; one also had to be sure they believed in the one God of the Bible, God the Father, and that they knew the plan of salvation that he had revealed and effected by his Spirit. Accordingly, when Jesus sends his disciples

---

<sup>21</sup>  
Oskar Skarsuane is professor of Patristic Studies and Early Church History at the Norwegian Lutheran School of Theology, Oslo.

<sup>46</sup> The most recent treatment of this formula is Lars Hartmann, ‘Into the name of the Lord Jesus,’ in the same author, *‘Into the Name of the Lord Jesus’: Baptism in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1997), 37-50.

to preach and teach and baptize among the gentiles, he bids them to baptize "into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19).

Modern believers are accustomed to thinking that the only natural way to put this command into practice is to use a baptismal formula like "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." But most of the early evidence seems to indicate that this formula was not used during the first centuries (it is first documented in the Syriac Church, and there only, from the third century AD).<sup>47</sup> Instead, three questions were put to the baptizand, to be answered by "Yes, I believe!": "Do you believe in God The Father?" "Do you believe in His Son Jesus (the Messiah/Lord)?" "Do you believe in The Holy Spirit?" When these questions had been put and answered, the candidate was baptized right away, nothing more was said, and in this way he or she had been "baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."<sup>48</sup>

Before we continue to investigate how and why these three baptismal questions of faith developed into the later creeds, I want to draw out one important point here. What we have seen already explains the basic function and meaning of a creed. The creed is, at the most fundamental level, the personal confession of faith by the individual believer, pronounced for the first time at the very point of entering the faith community at baptism. The confession of faith is the personal "Yes!" of each and every believer, the "Yes!" with which each one responds to the message of the gospel, the basic teaching of Scripture. There is therefore no competition, no rivalry, between Scripture and creed. *God* speaks in Scripture, *the believer* speaks in the creed. In the creed, the believer says yes to what God has said in Scripture. The creed is the believer's affirmative response to what God has said in the gospel. The creed is nothing like a "second source" of revelation alongside Scripture, it is only an answer, a response to scriptural revelation.

How and why did the originally very simple baptismal questions develop into the later declaratory creeds? One may discern at least two reasons. First, there was the need to "sum up" (in the questions of faith) the most important points which were taught to the baptismal candidates during their

---

<sup>47</sup> See E.C. Whitaker, "The History of the Baptismal Formula," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 16 (1965), 1-12; and the same author, "The Baptismal Formula in the Syrian Rite," *The Church Quarterly Review* (1960), 346-52.

<sup>48</sup> The classic treatment of the origin and development of these "baptismal questions of faith" is John Norman Davidson Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (3. ed. London: Longman 1972), 40-49. But see also, with new points of view, Wolfram Kinzig, "... natum et passum etc.' Zur Geschichte der Tauffragen in der lateinischen Kirche bis zu Luther," in W. Kinzig; Chr. Marksches; M. Vinzent, *Tauffragen und Bekenntnis. Studien zur sogenannten Traditio Apostolica, zu den Interrogationes de fide und zum Römischen Glaubensbekenntnis* (Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 74), Berlin/New York: de Gruyter 1999), 75-183.

catechumenate. Jesus being the Messiah—what, exactly, did that mean? In order to confess Jesus as the Messiah or Lord in a meaningful and unambiguous way, a few explanatory words were added to the second question of faith. Second, there were heretical notions around concerning the Father as well as the Son. Some thought that the God from whom Jesus came, and whose Son he was, was not the God of the Hebrew Bible, but a higher God having nothing to do with creation, the Bible, and the people of Israel. Others, for similar reasons, thought that God's Son had never clothed himself with a truly material body, nor had he really suffered death on a cross. Modern scholars call those who held these notions Gnostics. Gnostic teaching was quite widespread in antiquity. At baptism it was important to be sure that the candidate really confessed Jesus as the Messiah and Lord announced by the Bible, and not as an emissary from the God of the Gnostics.

It is easy to see how these questions could require some slight expansion of the baptismal questions. In the first question, it would be right on target to emphasize that God the Father was the creator of the world. In the second question, it would be opportune to emphasize the reality of Jesus' humanity, his real suffering and his bodily resurrection.

The first writer to give us direct testimony to this process of gradual expansion is Tertullian, AD 211: "We are thrice immersed, while we answer interrogations rather more extensive than our Lord has prescribed in the gospel [i.e. Matt 28:19]" (De corona ch. 3).<sup>49</sup> Two things emerge quite clearly from this brief remark: (1) Tertullian took Matthew 28:19 to mean that one should baptize people asking them whether they believed in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and (2) that in his time one or more of these three questions had been expanded to include more than the simple "Do you believe in the Father/the Son/the Holy Spirit?"

Some 50-60 years earlier than Tertullian, there is evidence in Justin Martyr to indicate that in his time the questions of faith may have had the following format:

Do you believe in the Father and Lord God of the universe?  
Do you believe in Jesus Christ our Saviour,  
who was crucified under Pontius Pilate?  
Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, who spoke by the prophets?<sup>50</sup>

Almost contemporaneous with Tertullian, Hippolytus of Rome has the following to say about the baptismal rite:

---

<sup>49</sup> This and other of Tertullian's references to the rites of baptism are conveniently assembled in E.C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy* (London: S.P.C.K. 1970), 7-10.

<sup>50</sup> Cp. Justin's *First Apology* 61:10ff, and Kelly's comments in *Creeds*, 72-73.

And he goes down to the water. Let him who baptizes [the presbyter] lay hand on him saying thus:

Do you believe in God Father Almighty?

And he who is being baptized shall say:

I believe.

Let him forthwith baptize him once, having his hand laid upon his head. After this let him say:

Do you believe in the Messiah Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, who was crucified in the days of Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose the third day living from the dead, and ascended into the heavens, and sat down at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead?

And when he says:

I believe,

let him baptize him the second time.

And again let him say:

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit in the Holy Church, and the resurrection of the flesh?

And he who is baptized shall say:

I believe,

and so let him baptize him the third time.<sup>51</sup>

As one can easily observe, we have here already the core of the Apostolic Creed in the format of three questions. The transition from questions to declaratory creed, in which the candidate made the questions his/her own statement by prefixing "I believe," probably happened during the third century, at least in Rome. It may have been caused by the need for the candidates, prior to baptism, to state publicly their faith as a solemn "summing up" of what they had learned during their period as catechumens.<sup>52</sup> This "Old Roman Creed" in declaratory form is attested by the eastern bishop Marcellus of Ancyra in AD 340. He quotes it in Greek, and most scholars think, by studying carefully his Greek version with old Latin versions of the same text, that the Greek is original and the Latin a translation. This means the original Creed would have been composed at a time when most Christians in Rome had Greek as their primary language. This leads us to a probable date between Hippolytus' questions ca. AD 210 and the dominance of Latin among Roman Christian authors in the latter half of the same century. In other words: The Old

---

<sup>51</sup> Quoted according to Whitaker's *Documents*, 5f.

<sup>52</sup> This Roman custom is affirmed quite explicitly at a somewhat later date (around AD 400) by Augustine (*Confessions* VIII.2.4f) and Rufinus (*Commentary on the Creed*, ch. 3). Some scholars think that it was only in this declaratory form that the second article of the creed got this amount of expansion, and that the second question in Hippolytus is a later interpolation in his text. I remain unconvinced by the arguments for this view, but in any case, it would only modify, not change basically the picture of the development of the creed I have been giving here. See for this alternative view. Kinzig/Markschies/Vinzent, *Tauffragen* (full ref. note 3 above).

Roman Creed probably was fixed in its wording some time during the period ca 210-250 AD.

In the Western Church, all local communities took over and slightly modified this Roman creed; it is therefore to be considered the “mother” of all later creeds in the West. In the period of Charlemagne (768-814) the local creed of Gaul (which we can trace back to around AD 500) was authorized as the normative form to be used by all and it gradually supplanted all other versions. It is this creed we now know as “The Apostolic Creed.”

### **Confessing Jesus as the Messiah: Apostolic Creed, Second Article**

Having seen how there is a direct line of development from Matthew 28:19 till the three articles of the Apostolic Creed, it remains for us to study the contents of the creed a little more fully. The focus will be on the second article, since faith in Jesus the Son of God was the central core of the baptismal confession from the very beginning.

The substantial expansion in the second article is *a story about Jesus* which begins with his birth from the Virgin, focuses heavily on his passion, death, resurrection, and heavenly enthronement, and ends with his return at the end of days. This type of Jesus story is much older than its imbedding in the second article of the creed. When we trace the history of this type of “summary” of the Jesus story, we discover that it seems to have had a quite specific *Sitz im Leben* (“setting-in-life”), viz. the elementary *teaching about Jesus as the Messiah proclaimed by the prophets of the Hebrew Bible*. In other words: In this type of summary, the “proof from prophecy” is always implied, and often explicitly referred to. And Jesus is portrayed as the Messiah announced by the prophets. We have here a Messianic Christology.

Instead of arguing this point in great detail, I will just present in chronological order some of the texts I consider milestones along this trajectory:

*What I received I passed on to you at the first, that  
Christ died for our sins  
according to the Scriptures,  
that he was buried,  
that he was raised on the third day  
according to the Scriptures,  
and that he appeared ... (1 Cor 15:3-5)<sup>53</sup>*

*We, unrolling the books of the prophets ~~which~~ we possess, who name Jesus Christ, partly in parables, partly in enigmas, partly expressly and in so many words, find [predicted in them]*

His coming

---

<sup>53</sup> NIV translation with alternative footnote reading in v. 3.

and death,  
and cross,  
and all the rest...  
and his resurrection  
and assumption to heaven...

*We have believed in God in consequence of what is written [in the Scriptures] respecting Him [Jesus the Messiah]... For we know that God enjoined these things, and we say nothing apart from the Scriptures (Preaching of Peter, ca AD 125).<sup>54</sup>*

In the books of the prophets we found Jesus our Messiah foretold as

coming,  
born of a virgin,  
reaching manhood, and healing every disease ...  
and being hated, and unrecognized, and crucified,  
and dying,  
and rising again, and ascending into heaven, being called and [really] being the

Son of God...

All this was prophesied before he appeared...

(Justin, 1. Apol. 31:7f; ca AD 150).<sup>55</sup>

The Church ... has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith:

(1)[She believes] in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and the sea and all things that are in them;

(2) and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation;

(3) and in the Holy Spirit,

who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations [of God] and the [two] comings [of the Messiah]:

the birth from a virgin,

the passion,

and the resurrection from the dead,

and the ascension into heaven...

and his future coming from heaven in the glory of the Father...

to raise up anew all flesh...

and execute just judgment...

(Irenaeus, Against Heresies I:10:1; ca AD 190).<sup>56</sup>

The common feature of these summaries leaps to the eye: In his historical career, Jesus *fulfilled the Messianic prophecies*. He *began* to fulfil them – if such an expression is allowed – at the point when he entered history and was born of

---

<sup>54</sup> This writing was apparently an early second century imitation of the canonical book of Acts, probably focusing more on missionary speeches by Peter. It has not been preserved in its entirety, but some fragments, among them the one given here, are contained in quotations from the book in Clement of Alexandria. Translation according to *Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. II, 510.

<sup>55</sup> Translation according to *Ante-Nicene Fathers* I, 173, slightly altered.

<sup>56</sup> Translation according to *ANFI*, 330, slightly altered.

Mary. Therefore the virgin birth from Mary is often the starting-point in summaries like this. (There is no mention of the Son of God existing with God before he became man, or even being with God before the creation of the world and from eternity.)

In this type of summary the focus is not on the nature, the essence of the Messiah's person, but on the Messianic *task*, which was predicted in the prophets and fulfilled by Jesus from the moment he entered history. The emphasis in this type of summary—and therefore in the Old Roman Creed, second article, is on the Messiah's work, his function, rather than on the nature of his person as such. The second article of the baptismal confession of the Western (Latin) Church is thus a strikingly "Jewish" confession of a Messiah with markedly "Jewish" characteristics.<sup>57</sup>

### **Confessing Jesus as the Incarnate Word of God: Nicene Creed, Second Article.**

When we turn to the other main creed of the Old Church, the Nicene Creed, many scholars would say that we enter a completely different world of thought. If we are right in claiming the Old Roman creed as a basically Jewish confession of Jesus as the Messiah, can we say the same about the Nicene Creed? If not, is the explanation that the Nicene Creed is more Hellenistic than Jewish?

The creed now recited in Churches all around the world as the "Nicene" creed is really a later modification of the original creed of the council of Nicaea (AD 325). The original runs like this:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God,  
begotten from the Father, onlybegotten,

*that is, from the substance of the Father,*

God from God,

light from light,

*true God from true God,*

*begotten, not made,*

*of one substance with the Father,*

through whom [the Son] all things came into being,

---

<sup>57</sup> This is not to say that the Roman community, or Roman theologians, in the middle of the third century were unfamiliar, if not to say had no knowledge, with the "high" Christology of a Divine and pre-existent Son of God. This high Christology is easily documented in Roman authors right from the beginning of the second century. It is all the more striking that the Roman community should choose to stick to this "Jewish" Messianology in its baptismal confession.

things in heaven and things on earth,  
 Who - because of us men and because of our salvation - came down and became  
 incarnate,  
 becoming man,  
 suffered,  
 and rose again on the third day,  
 ascended to the heavens,  
 will come to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.<sup>58</sup>

This creed was probably made in the following way: The “drafting committee” took as textual basis a typical *eastern* baptismal creed – possibly the one of Jerusalem! – and only inserted in it the four lines that are italicized in the quotation above. These lines are the only “controversial” statements in the creed, apart from them there is nothing special about it. But even without these lines, we easily observe that this creed is very different from the Old Roman creed we studied above.<sup>59</sup> The following synopsis displays the differences:

*2nd article, Nicaea*

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
 the Son of God,  
 begotten from the Father,  
 onlybegotten,  
 God from God,  
 light from light,  
 through whom (the Son)  
 all things came into being, things  
 in heaven and things on earth,  
 Who - because of us men and  
 because of our salvation -  
 came down and became incarnate,  
 becoming man,  
 suffered,

*2nd article, Old Roman*

And in Messiah Jesus,  
 God's only Son,  
 our Lord  
  
 Who was born of the  
 Holy Spirit  
 and the Virgin Mary,  
  
 was crucified under

---

<sup>58</sup> Translation according to Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 215f. In the creed as formulated at Nicaea, there was also appended, at the end, the following clause (cp. Gal 1:8f): “But as for those who say, ‘There was when He was not, and before being born He was not, and that He came into existence out of nothing,’ or who assert that the Son of God is of a different being or substance, or is subject to alteration and change - these the Catholic and Apostolic Church condemns” (Kelly, 216).

<sup>59</sup> For analyses of the origin and meaning of the creed from Nicaea, cf. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, chs. VII and VIII; Oskar Skarsaune, “A Neglected Detail in the Creed of Nicaea (325),” *Vigiliae Christianae* 41 (1987): 34-54; Richard P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), ch. 6 (= pp. 152-178).



and rose again  
on the third day,  
ascended to the heavens,

will come to judge  
the living and the dead.

Pontius Pilate,  
was buried  
arose from the dead  
on the third day  
ascended into heaven  
and sits at the  
Father's right hand  
from whence  
He will come to judge  
the living and the dead.

Some differences in format and style leap to the eye: The longest passage in the eastern type of creed concerns the being of the Son with God before the world was created. Then there is a weighty statement that he *participated in creating the world*. In the Old Roman creed there is nothing that corresponds to this. The statements about the Son's human birth are also different: the Old Roman Creed states, in a simple, narrative fashion, that he was born of the Holy Spirit and Mary. This is the same way of telling the story as we have in Matthew and Luke. The eastern creed expresses the same fact much more "theologically," basically the same way as in John: the Son became flesh, was incarnate,<sup>60</sup> became man. Up to this point, the eastern creed has been much more extensive than the Western (Roman), but now the picture changes. In the eastern creed the entire life-story of Jesus, including his suffering, crucifixion, death, and burial, is condensed into the one word "suffered." Notice also that in the eastern creed the session at God's right hand—which we interpreted as the statement about the exalted Jesus' *Messianic reign*—is left out.

To conclude: While the Old Roman creed portrays Jesus as the Messiah doing the task predicted by the prophets; the eastern creed portrays him as a divine being becoming incarnate, as the mediator of creation who himself became man, suffered for his own creatures, and was then exalted. While the Roman creed is oriented "horizontally" along the time axis—prophetic promises, fulfilment—the eastern creed is oriented "vertically": the one who was with God and created the world with him "came down," suffered, rose again, shall finally descend once more as the final judge.

### Nicene Christology—Hellenistic?

Jewish scholars in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modern times, have almost unanimously claimed that the idea that Jesus is the incarnate Word of God is *unjewish*, and a product of the transplantation of Christianity from a Jewish milieu to a gentile-Hellenistic milieu. Liberal Christian scholars in modern

---

<sup>60</sup> In Latin, the Son's coming "in the flesh" is *in carne* - from which derives *incarnatus* and "incarnation" in English.

times have said much the same thing, as e.g. the great historian of dogma, Adolf von Harnack. His saying has become famous: "The Christological dogma ... is a product of the spirit of Hellenism on the soil of the Gospel."<sup>61</sup>

Harnack himself knew well that there is no way of holding the eastern creed to be basically Greek and un-Jewish, and at the same time hold John the evangelist, or for that matter Paul, to be un-Greek and Jewish in their Christology. Therefore, according to many critical scholars, the process of "hellenizing" Christianity must have begun very early, already in Paul, and seems to have reached a first climax in John 1:1-18 (the so-called "Joannine prologue").

But does this view stand up to scrutiny? If we could ask the Church Fathers themselves what *they* thought was the background of the Christology of the eastern creed, they would no doubt have answered: This creed is *biblical* through and through, not only in substance, but also in wording. And by "biblical" they would have meant: Every word and clause in the creed can be substantiated from the *Old Testament*, not only from the New. Now, in their Old Testament they sometimes included the so-called Apocrypha, and did so in this case. But there is no question of the Jewishness of the Apocrypha; they belong to "mainstream" Judaism of the two last centuries BC.

I will argue that the Church Fathers were quite simply right in this claim for biblical foundation of their Christology. The Christology of the eastern creeds is certainly *other* than the Messianic confession of the Roman Creed, but that does not automatically imply that it is less rooted in Jewish tradition. Let us try to trace these roots

### **Nicene Christology: Wisdom Incarnate**

Let us first make a survey of the New Testament passages that are most similar to the first part of the Christological statement of the Nicene creed.

*For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ through whom are all things and through whom we exist (1 Cor 8:6).*

*He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born prior to all creation; for by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, ... all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.... (Col 1:15-17).*

---

<sup>61</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte I* (5. ed. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1931), 20: "Das Dogma ist in seiner Conception und in seiner Ausbau ein Werk des griechischen Geistes auf dem Boden des Evangeliums." After Harnack, almost every scholar writing on the subject of Old Church dogma in general, and Christology in particular, has had to take issue with this thesis.

*But in these last days he has spoken to us by the Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word (Heb 1:2f).*

*The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation (Rev 3:14).*

*In the beginning was the Word [Greek: Logos], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made, without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life... (John 1:1-4).*

This list shows us that the "Johannine prologue" is not an isolated and singular text in the New Testament, as far as Christology is concerned. John has Paul and the author of Hebrews to support him in what he says of the Word in John 1. Maybe we should add two more supporters, if Revelation is written by another John than the evangelist, and Paul is quoting a pre-Pauline hymn in Colossians 1:15ff (as many scholars think).

It is easy to see what is common to all these passages about the pre-existent Son of God: The common feature is the saying that he assisted God at the creation of the world; that God created *through him* or *by him*. Let us call this the idea of *mediatorship in creation*. The Son or the Word is God's *mediator* in creating the world.

This helps us to pose the right question when we ask for the Jewish roots of this Christology. Scholars have often searched in general for ideas of pre-existence in Judaism, and found many and diverse answers as to what could qualify as "background" of Christology. But if we ask more precisely: Which thing or person—which "X"—is playing an important role in Judaism in sayings like "God created the world through X", then the answer is obvious and easy to find in the extant sources: In Jewish writings of the second temple period there is one such X, and one only: *the Wisdom of God*.

Here is a sample of such sayings:

*The Lord by wisdom founded the earth (Prov 3:19).*

*[Wisdom speaking:] When God assigned to the sea its limit, ... when He marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him like a master workman (Prov 8:29f).*

*Wisdom is an initiate in the knowledge of God and an associate in His works (Wisdom of Solomon, 8:4).*

31

*By your Wisdom you formed man... (Wisdom of Solomon, 9:2)*

It may seem surprising at first that God's Wisdom, which is not a person, should be such an important model for God's Son, who is certainly a person. But here we should notice two things: (1) This background makes it easier to

understand that in the Johannine prologue the Son is *also* identified with something that is seemingly not a person—the Word. It is interesting to notice that in *Wisdom of Solomon* (one of the apocryphal books), God’s Wisdom is also identified with God’s word (*Logos*). (2) In several texts in the Old Testament and the Apocrypha, God’s Wisdom is in fact described—or “behaves”—*as if* it were a person. Scholars have for a long time wrestled with the problem of how to explain this phenomenon properly. Some think it should be described as nothing more than a “poetic personification” of an aspect of God, while others think that this does not do full justice to the texts which identify God’s Wisdom with something that is to a certain extent exterior to God. Foremost among these identifications is the one which identifies God’s Wisdom with the Torah—on this more in a moment. Some scholars have therefore come to the conclusion that Wisdom in these texts is an aspect of God which has at the same time a kind of quasi-personal existence outside him, and they call this a “hypostatization”<sup>62</sup> of one of God’s attributes

Before we go on in exploring this idea further, let us see to what extent this Wisdom concept may clarify the *terminology* used in the Christological texts representing this Wisdom Christology.

(1) In Hebrews the Son of God is said to be a radiance (Greek: *apaugasma*) of God’s glory and an imprint/image (Greek: *charakter*) of his being. This is a free quotation, actually, of *Wisdom of Solomon* 7:26, which says of Wisdom: She is a radiance (*apaugasma*) of the eternal Light, an undistorted mirror of God’s energy, and an image (*eikon*) of God’s goodness.

(2) In *Colossians* 1:15 the Son is said to be, like Wisdom, the *image (eikon)* of the invisible God, and then “the first-born (*proto-tokos*) prior to all things created.” In *Proverbs* 8:22 the Hebrew text may well be translated: “In the beginning, before his works, the Lord begat me,” and further: “*Before* he made the earth and the deep places, before water came forth from the sources ... before the world (*pro aionos*)... he *begat* me” (*Prov* 8:24-26 Septuagint; the Hebrew has the same point, but partly different objects).

(3) The most striking parallel is yet to be mentioned. It comes in a Wisdom text not yet quoted, viz. the self-praise of Wisdom in *Sirach* 24. This text also has the idea of Wisdom being present with God when he created the world—but then an important idea is added: Wisdom began to seek a place to  *dwell on earth* (“become incarnate”, we could perhaps say), but found none, until “the Creator of all things ... chose the place for my tent (*ten skenen mou*). He said:

---

<sup>62</sup> The Greek word *hypostasis* is taken from Christian terminology, in which it became the word to describe the three persons of the Trinity. It is interesting to notice that when scholars tried to find an appropriate term for the unique position of Wisdom - being an aspect of the one God and at the same time somehow external to him - they had to turn to Trinitarian terminology!

*pitch your tent*<sup>63</sup> (*kataskenoson*) in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance. ... *In the holy tent* I ministered before him, and so I was established in Zion" (Sirach 24:8-10). As is well known, it is exactly the same terminology which is applied to the Word's incarnation in John 1:14, which literally says: "The Word became flesh and *pitched his tent* (*eskenosen*) among us." The Sirach background makes clear why the metaphor of *tent* is used in John 1:14—it is the Glory and Name of God *dwelling in the Tabernacle/Temple* which explains the tent imagery. This also makes it easier to understand why *seeing the glory* plays such a great role in the Johannine prologue: the glory and the cloud of glory were intimately associated with the holy tent and its successor, the temple.

Taken together, this leads us to the following conclusion: The Christology of the New Testament passages (1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:15ff; Heb 1:2f; Rev 3:14; John 1:1-18) we have surveyed is a Jewish "Wisdom Christology." Jesus did not only possess wisdom, was not only a wise man, he was himself God's Wisdom in person, he was Wisdom incarnate, the Word made flesh. This is a Christology *other* than the Messianic, but no less Jewish, and not necessarily later in time.<sup>64</sup>

### **A Jewish Parallel: "Torah-logy"**

In Sirach 24, Wisdom is identified with another important object in God's plan of creation: the Law of Moses, the Torah. "All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law which Moses commanded us as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob" (v. 23). This identification of Torah and Wisdom became stock in trade with the rabbis, and is universal in rabbinic literature.<sup>65</sup>

In the rabbinic writings we find an interesting midrashic reading in which the two sayings about creation in Genesis 1:1 and Proverbs 8:22 are combined, and referred to the Torah. In Proverbs 8:22ff the Rabbis read that Wisdom was begotten as "Beginning" *before* the rest of creation; this made them read Gen 1:1 in the following manner: "By (means of) 'Beginning' = Wisdom, God created the heavens and the earth." In the Targums (Yerushalmi and Neofiti) we find this exegesis in an interesting double translation of *bereshit*: "*mileqadim bechokmah bara elohim...*": "In the beginning, by Wisdom, God created..." And in *Midrash Rabba* on Genesis 1.1 we find the further identification of Wisdom and Torah spelled out in a magnificent story of creation:

---

<sup>63</sup> I have chosen a quite literal translation in order to make the point more clear.

<sup>64</sup> On the relationship between this "high" Christology and Jewish monotheism in Antiquity, see my two articles "Is Christianity Monotheistic? Patristic Perspectives on a Jewish/Christian Debate," in Elizabeth A. Livingstone (ed.), *Studia Patristica XXIX: Historica, Theologica et Philosophica, Critica et Philologica* (Leuven: Peeters 1997), 340-363; "Altkirchliche Christologie - jüdisch/unjüdisch?," *Evangelische Theologie* 59 (1999), 267-285.

<sup>65</sup> See the material gathered in Strack/Billerbeck II, 353ff.

The Torah declares: 'I was the working tool of the Holy One, blessed be He' [cf. Prov 8:29: "I was with him as a master worker" (Hebrew: 'amon)]. In human practice, when a mortal king builds a palace, he builds it not with his own skill but with the skill of an architect. The architect moreover does not build it out of his head, but employs plans and diagrams to know how to arrange the chambers and the wicket doors. Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, "By 'The Beginning' God created" [Gen 1:1], 'The Beginning' referring to the Torah, as in the verse, "The Lord made me The Beginning of His way" [Prov 8:22].

Basically the same midrash is preserved in Philo,<sup>66</sup> and Rabbi Akiva seems to hint at it when he says: "Beloved are Israel, for to them was given the precious instrument; still greater was the love, in that it was made known to them that to them was given *the precious instrument by which the world was created*" (M Aboth 3:14).<sup>67</sup> The position accorded to the Wisdom-Torah in such texts as these prompted the rabbis to call the Torah "God's daughter" (TB Sanhedrin 101a; Lev Rab 20:10 etc.).<sup>68</sup>

The fact that mainstream Judaism came to identify God's Wisdom, his assistant at the creation of the world, with the Torah, while believers in Jesus identified it with Jesus the incarnate Word/Wisdom, explains why Jesus came to play much the same functional role in Christian belief as the Torah does in Jewish belief.

### The Nicene Precisions — What Do They Mean?

When a man *makes* something, that something is not of the same nature as its maker, precisely because it is made. An artist can make a perfect statue of himself, but it is not of the same nature as the artist, it is not of the same, living stuff as the artist and does not share *his* kind of life. On the other hand, when the artist *begets* a son, the son may not be his exact copy, but he is definitely of the same *nature*, the same stuff as his father. He shares *his* kind of life. He is "from his Father's being," "of the same essence" as his Father.

---

<sup>66</sup> De opificio mundi (On the making of the world), 17-20.

<sup>67</sup> Very likely, the "instrumental" reading of *be-reshit*, equating *reshit* with Wisdom/Torah, was already known to the author of Revelation, because when he calls Jesus "the *arche* (beginning) of God's creation," he may be alluding to Gen 1:1 Greek: "By *arche* God created ..."

<sup>68</sup> Both Wisdom and Torah are female words in Hebrew; Wisdom is female in Greek, too. This may be sufficient reason why the *term* Wisdom never won any monopoly among believers in Jesus as the term for the pre-existent Son of God; although it was extensively used as a Christological title by the Church Fathers. But when the Jewish texts already contained the masculine *Logos* as an equivalent to Wisdom, it is no wonder that believers in Jesus preferred this word - the more so, since God's *Logos* evoked not only the idea of God's *creative plan* - as Wisdom did - but also his *creative word* of Gen 1:3ff and Ps 33:6.

The very simple point of Nicene Christology is that the last, not the first, analogy is the right one when it comes to finding the right way to express the relationship between the Father and the Son. *We* are *made* by God, therefore different from Him in nature, not sharing His kind of life. But the Son is *begotten* by God, therefore of the same nature, sharing God's kind of divine life.

If we take a new look at the creed of Nicaea, we observe that the inserted clauses stress only this point. Apart from the inserted clauses, the creed is a simple paraphrase of biblical sayings about Jesus=Wisdom. When it says, for example, that the pre-existent Logos is "light from light," this is a shortened expression for what is said in Wisdom 7:26 (and repeated in Hebrews 1:3): Wisdom is "a radiance of the eternal Light." And when the Nicene creed says that the Son is born from the Father "before the ages," that is an encapsulated short version of Proverbs 8:22ff (e.g. "from the primeval times before the earth's existence," v. 23).

In the Wisdom texts (Old Testament, Apocrypha, and New Testament), the Church Fathers from the very beginning found several metaphors describing the relationship between God and his Wisdom. These they transferred to Christology. The Father is to the Wisdom/Son as the root is to the tree (cp. Prov 3:18; Sirach 24:12ff); as the light is to its radiance (Wisdom 7:26)—a variant of this metaphor: as the sun is to its ray (cf. Sirach 24:32); and as the source is to the river (cf. Baruch 3:12, God the fountain of Wisdom; Sirach 24:25ff, Wisdom an overflowing Paradise river).

Tertullian uses all these metaphors to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son (esp. in *Against Praxeas* chs. 5-8), and once says that "the Paraclete (Holy Spirit) teaches" these metaphors (*A.P.* 8:5)—no doubt a reference to the Wisdom metaphors in Scripture.

In these metaphors, the church fathers recognized the same basic *unity of nature* as in the birth metaphor: God and his Wisdom, The Father and the Son, were "of the same stuff," as the water is the same in the fountain and the river, etc. To explain the metaphors by a concept, Tertullian used the word "substance": the same substance is in the fountain and in the river, and so it is with the Father and the Son:

*There is no division of substance, but merely an extension, as when a light is kindled from a light. ...[Thus Christ is] Spirit of Spirit, and God of God... (Apology, 21.12f).*

Thus, the concept of substance and the Wisdom metaphors explain each other mutually. When Tertullian wants to elucidate the meaning of the metaphors, he uses the concept of substance; when he wants to make clear the meaning of the concept, he uses the metaphors.

What happened before the council of Nicaea, was that a presbyter in Alexandria, Arius, totally rejected every notion of a common nature of the Father and the Son. The Son was *made*, and therefore of a different nature. He was a creature, although in a category by himself (Arius, too, believed that the

rest of creation had been created through the Son). But he firmly rejected any notion that the Son's being was an extension of the Father's. He therefore also rejected all the Wisdom metaphors traditionally used in pre-Nicene Christology, as in the following letter to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria (ca AD 320):

*[The Son is] a perfect creature of God ... an offspring ... but not as Valentinus said, that the offspring of the Father was an emanation;<sup>69</sup> nor as Mani taught that the offspring was a part of the Father, consubstantial [homousios]... nor as Hieracas (said:) of one torch from another, or as a lamp divided into two...<sup>70</sup>*

Adolf von Harnack, himself by no means an admirer of orthodoxy, had the following to say about Arius' doctrine:

*Arianism is a new teaching in the Church. ... It is not new only because it contended so sharply and publicly that the Logos was created ..., but it is new because it explicitly denies every substantive connection between the Logos and the Father. The old images which were nearly as old in the Church as the Logos doctrine itself, the spring and the brook, the sun and the light, the original picture and its reflection, are here cast away. But that signifies nothing less than that the Christian doctrine of the Logos and God's Son is discarded. All that remains, are the old names.<sup>71</sup>*

In light of this, the meaning of the inserted clauses in the creed of Nicaea becomes plain. They are not intended to introduce a new, revolutionary interpretation of the old Eastern Creed; on the contrary, they are intended as safeguards around the old meaning of the creed.

Certainly the Fathers at Nicaea did not "Hellenize" Christology by this creed. The very idea of the real God becoming incarnate, and even suffering, was as offensive to Hellenists as to anyone else. In Nicaea the Church confessed that the Son, of one being with the Father, had indeed suffered. And there was no way of softening this by explaining that the divine nature in the Son was of a less divine or semi-divine character. In Christ, God suffered. That was as offensive to Hellenists as to anybody, but the Fathers at Nicaea understood this to be the doctrine of Scripture.

---

<sup>69</sup> Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 5ff, had used precisely this term to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son: just as the river is an emanation from the spring, so the Son from the Father. Tertullian was aware that the Gnostics (Valentinus) had used this term, but was confident that it was nevertheless useful to express orthodox doctrine. Arius, of course, was out<sup>36</sup> to discredit the word by attaching it to a well-known heretic.

<sup>70</sup> This metaphor, making the "light from light" concrete, was in fact one of the favorite metaphors of the pre-Nicene fathers, beginning with Justin.

<sup>71</sup> *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* II (5. ed. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1931), 221, my translation.



In a televised interview on Norwegian Television (April 1978) Pinchas Lapidé said the following:

*I used to think that becoming incarnate was impossible to God. But recently I have come to the conclusion that it is unjewish to say that this is something the God of the Bible cannot do, that he cannot come that close. I have had second thoughts about the incarnation...*