

Background Names, Beliefs and Assumptions

-compiled by Paul Duggan-

IMPORTANT BACKGROUND NAMES, BELIEFS, AND ASSUMPTIONS IN THE CULTURAL MILIEU OF THE EARLY CHURCH

1. Emperor, Emperor worship: (Frend, p. 5, 62)
 - the emperor had a special relationship with the gods; believed to be somewhat more than a mortal,
 - the emperor's genius: more than a guardian spirit, an energizing and life-giving force of personality, an aspect of divine power assuring the permanence of the imperial house,
 - called the Pontificus Maximus, the bridge builder or the one who bridges the gap between man and the gods; later a title used by the pope,
 - led to a worship of the emperor himself as "Lord",
 - common worship of the gods and the emperor was thought necessary for the welfare of the empire,
 - when Christianity became the recognized religion of the empire, a unity of doctrine and worship continued to be thought of as important in the eyes of the emperor and church leaders for the welfare of the empire,
2. polytheism:
 - each deity had a special function in nature as an expression of ultimate deity, and had special duties in creation and in the events of human life;
 - worship of the various deities was regarded as necessary for the welfare of the empire and for benefits in one's personal life (p. 62),
 - the most important deity or unseen force was Chance or fate,
 - "stoicheia" as in Gal. 4:9 (p. 8):
 - rudimentary forces or demonic beings thought to control human events and lives, could be controlled or influenced by horoscopes and cultic practices,
 - could also mean the basic or fundamental beliefs and principles of pagan society.
3. martyrdom:
 - seen as a way to gain direct entry into heaven, and for early believers, as a duty,
 - when persecutions were suspended or ceased, asceticism became a substitute for martyrdom.
4. Platonism: various schools of thought based on the phil. of Plato, 429-347 b.c. (p. 11, see p. 92 Origen)
 - true reality consists of a real world of forms (the essential non-material character or essence of things, i.e., round-ness, color-ness, dog-ness, horse-ness, etc.) which preexisted the material world and continue to exist beyond the perceived or visible world and could be apprehended only by the mind,
 - knowledge of true reality was possible but not through the senses, rather through the operation of the mind,
 - visible reality is not completely real, rather it is petty, mutable and transient;
 - the universe is an ordered and harmonious whole, a foreseeing providence; the world is one city;

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- the logos, the first form, is a created semi-spiritual entity; often translated as 'reason';
 - in Gr. philosophy, the organizing principle of the universe, (see notes attached),
 - ea. person partakes of the same creative power that guides the universe, and is a tiny fragment of the universal reason,
 - ideas of justice, beauty, truth, and goodness are not the result of thoughts or actions but have a real existence beyond visible reality,
 - virtue consisted in living according to reason, human reason was part of the divine reason, the fire which underlay all life;
 - man's duty is to conform to these virtues and master irrational elements by ascetic practices and thought, to liberate the soul from the prison of the body, to attain to mystical experience, a vision of the divine, or a mystical union with ultimate soul,
 - the soul alone would ascent to reality,
 - Platonism was an alternative to philosophies of fatalism (chance and fate), and to ideas of Iranian demonology coming from the east, eg. the mystery religions,
 - it offered both grandeur and a resignation to life, but no hope of personal immortality, basically a creed of earthly duty,
 - Pl. greatly influence early Christian thinkers and theologians many of whom believed that a union between philosophy and Christian doctrine could be achieved,
 - the gr. logos was an essential principle of Platonic thought and found its way into early Christian theology and thinking, sometimes as a force within the Christ, sometimes as the Christ himself, but the typical Gr. understanding of logos was quite different than what was understood and used by John the apostle,
 - briefly, for John, the 'word' was a person, the 'Word of God' as spoken to the prophets and revealed in the flesh to the world,
5. mystery religions: c. second century, p. 12
- mainly imported from Persian areas,
 - bizarre practices with a strange hold on adherents,
 - obeyed often bizarre commands from a god, typically a goddess as in Isis worship,
 - frequently a mother goddess, sometimes called the Queen of Heaven, with a male consort,
 - humanity was the victim of the powers of chaos and negation - a form of evil, overcome by special knowledge and "identification" or union with the god,
 - "identification" w. the god was achieved through initiation rites and mystical experiences, resulting in a victor over fate.
 - (compare this with Platonism above).
6. gnosticism: 2nd century, (p. 50)
- a bewildering and often contradictory system of eons, emanations, forces, secret knowledge, and complex relationships in the spiritual world,
 - much bogus literature pilfered from Jewish and Christian scriptures and other pagan ideas,
 - a considerable influence on early Chr. thought,

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- from the Gr. word 'gnosis,' i.e., knowledge; for gnostics, knowledge of who we were before we were trapped in a body and how to return to that former state,
 - salvation and union w. God is acquired through special knowledge, not as book knowledge, but as experiential knowledge, illumination, or enlightenment, passed on by someone who already "knows"; for the gnostic, a mystical and often irrational experience,
 - knowledge of the mysteries of the universe and through that knowledge, power to overcome demons and chance,
 - through self-mastery one can win a return to god, a return to the realm of light,
 - the ultimate and highest god is separate from creation by a hierarchical array of spiritual powers,
 - Valentinus, c. 160 a.d., "redemption (is) the spiritual resurrection which devours the psychical (i.e., the psychological, from psuche, Gr. for soul) and fleshly resurrection"
 - Yahweh, the creator and ruler of the universe, is an unfriendly god rather far down the list of emanations, and is not the true God,
 - gnosticism was seen as a more interesting and dramatic alternative to a persistent life of Christian virtue, and as an answer to a hostile universe governed by chance and demon forces,
 - the source of knowledge for earthly man is the "Christ,"
 - the Christ could not be in contact with matter, hence no incarnation, passion, or resurrection; only a temporary union between a heavenly being and the man Jesus,
 - required intermediaries such as Mary Magdalene or the Virgin Mary to complete the connection with the realm of light;
 - the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary first appears in Egyptian gnostic legends,
 - O.T. laws were not divine laws but temporary expedients, etc.,
 - three categories of man: 1) the elect, predestined to salvation, 2) the "psychics", or soul men, men and women capable of salvation if they acquired true knowledge, and 3) the rest of humanity (the deplorables) who went about their lives in ignorance and were destined for eternal death,
 - since the gnostic possessed secret knowledge, he could outwardly show allegiance to any other gods and perform sacrifices without endangering his status.
 - Current gnostic thinking as expressed in the words of the character Christian Stern in *Wolf on a String* by Benjamin Black, 2017. "I have always considered the appearance of things to be no more than a gauzy veil behind which a truer reality is covertly and marvelously at work (p. 48)."
7. monarchianism: many variations, a.d. 200-230, (p. 77)
- advocated a single undifferentiated God,
 - reducing the role of the Son and Holy Spirit to various manifestations or steps along the way in which the one God gradually revealed himself to man,
 - Christ was the father himself, or in another version, God created his Word (the logos of Gr. phil.) which was Christ who later became part of the godhead,
 - or, Jesus was was a mere man endowed with the Holy Spirit, and adopted into the Godhead after resurrection,

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- God sent his spirit on the man Jesus at baptism and gave him power to work miracles,
 - the Holy Spirit was only a manifestation of the grace of the Father,
 - denies the personal distinction of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
 - denies the existence of the pre-incarnate Jesus,
 - attempted to explain the scripture in term of Hellenic logic,
 - similar to modalism and Sabellianism.
8. modalism: another name for monarchianism or Sabellianism
- attempted to validate the full deity of the Son by claiming the Christ was actually the Father,
 - some modalists claimed the Jesus was a mere man.
9. Sabellianism: p. 77
- similar to monarchianism and modalism,
 - a single monad revealing itself as three different modes of the same person,
 - the "trinity" consists of simple modes, or aspect of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one substance but three activities.
10. Origen (184-254 AD): theology of the "logos", (p. 87, 92)
- sought to integrate Greek philosophical ideas and biblical elements,
 - "Origen added a new factor (to interpretation) derived from his Platonist studies. All things, even the simplest, in the Bible reflect the real spiritual order beyond the visible world." (Frend, p. 92) - Note the Platonist influence.
 - Origen tried to avoid the problems of monarchianism by using the logos concept, but seems to have believed in two (or possibly three) gods, but one in unity; he believed the Holy Spirit was the first of the created beings, created by the Word,
 - this led to a type of Tri-theism in later followers,
 - also tried to demonstrate that Christianity was a reasonable faith and consistent with Gr. philosophy as a journey from ignorance to enlightenment, his work was very important in the development of the theology of the Eastern Church,
 - Logos: in Greek phil. the organizing principle of the universe that preceded the creation or existence of the universe itself, an impersonal created entity that directed and ordered all existence; another definition, logos was the divine reason that permeates and orders the universe and also permeates the human mind,
 - John's logos: based on OT usage, the wisdom or word of God personified and revealed in Jesus,
 - before the ages all minds were pure including demons, human souls, and angels, but God drove out the rebellious minds which became imprisoned in bodies,
 - since all minds possessed free will, they had the power to return to God, thus man also had the power to return to God by means of his will and to attain salvation,
 - salvation was a gradual upward process in knowledge of God, each step was seen to be "in Christ," thus Christ was more of a model for life than an atonement for sin,
 - implicitly denied the resurrection and accepted some form of reincarnation in the soul's gradual process of purification, (p. 93)

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- for Origen, “there was neither heaven nor hell, but only the gradual education and purification of the universe and its beings until once more God was all in all.” (Frend, p. 93),
 - believed that all beings would eventually be restored to God,
 - his approach to the OT led to the use of allegory to interpret scripture, especially the more difficult passages that did not seem to favor God’s character,
 - condemned in 553.
11. For more details on the term “Logos” see additional notes on various meanings and usages in Gr. phil., the NT, and post apostolic writers.
12. Arianism, Arian (250-335 AD)
- approached the problem of Father and Son from the perspective of Gr. rationalism and Logos theology,
 - God is immutable, unknowable, and only one; no substance of God could be shared with another being, nor be in contact with the created order,
 - the idea of the Trinity as ‘3 in 1’ had not yet been proposed until just before the Council of Constantinople in 381, hence there was much consternation and debate about how Christ could also be God and what was his relationship to the Father,
 - Arius adapted ideas from Logos Theology and believed Christ was a subordinate being to the Father,
 - the Logos, as a created being, was a necessary intermediary,
 - Christ was first in the created order,
 - he was of ‘similar substance’ but not the ‘same substance’ as the Father,
 - called the Son of God only as an honor,
 - condemned by the council of Nicaea in 325 which used the word *homoousia* to assert that Father and the Son were of the same substance,
 - *homoousia* created further difficulties and disagreements until Constantinople,
 - modern versions: unitarianism, Jehovah’s Witnesses.
13. Manichaeism: 3rd cent.
- founded by Mani; a gnostic religion emanating from Persia,
 - important because Augustine was an adherent for 10 yrs.,
 - attempted an explanation of good and evil, through a dualistic system of light and darkness,
 - basically a gnostic dualism that sought salvation through esoteric knowledge and asceticism,
 - in the primeval order, light and darkness, i.e., good and evil, existed in eternal separation and coexistence,
 - eventually particles of light became mixed with darkness resulting in the fall of primal man and a second creation by evil powers in which particles of light, i.e., the soul of man and things in nature also, became entrapped in physical matter,
 - man as a particle of light is one in substance with God,
 - the trapped soul could be awakened by ‘gnosis’ and severe ascetic practices,

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- “Redemption of Light occurs by a cosmic mechanism in the heavens by which particles of light (souls) are drawn up” to the moon for fifteen days ... transferred to the sun and finally to paradise. (EDT, P. 729),
- there are two classes of men: the elect, who were sealed with a threefold purity, and the hearers, who can hope for better luck through reincarnation,
- ascetic practices include abstinence from meat, strong drink, property, work that might damage other forms of Light in nature, and sexual activity; and daily prayers and sacramental meals,
- eventually light and darkness will be separated as before and all matter will be destroyed,
- God has sent many prophets, including Zoroaster, Buddha, and Christ, but Mani is the greatest,
- Christ is a prophet but not incarnate,
- Christ's teaching were corrupted by his followers,
- rejected the OT, and reinterpreted the NT through the lens of their system.

14. baptism:

- required for admission to the church,
- provided forgiveness of all sins committed prior to baptism,
- what about sins committed after baptism? usually forgiven by performing some type of penance or through the sacraments,

15. grace:

- in the early days, perhaps thought of as some kind of spiritual substance or presence similar to ideas of spiritual entities in Platonic thought,
- one must remain in the “state of grace” in order to get into heaven at the end of life,
- grace was primarily dispensed through sacraments, i.e., rituals that provided the believer with grace, which in turn could only be administered by officers of the church such as bishops, presbyters, priest, or deacons,
- created a franchise on grace,
- resulted in the necessity for a series of intermediaries between man and God.

16. sacramental system:

- grace is conferred and transmitted to the christian mainly through sacraments,
- the sacraments can only be administered by officials of the church, eg. priests, bishops, or their representatives,
- to be denied sacraments is to be denied the grace needed to maintain a state of grace and the hope of heaven, thus to be excommunicated was a serious situation,
- the sacramental system necessitated mediators between Christ and man.

17. salvation:

- achieved at the end of life if one remained in the “state of grace”, not at the moment of conversion or new birth,
- no salvation outside the church, thus, if excommunicated, your probably won't make it to heaven,

18. eucharist:

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- the actual body and blood of Christ not just elements of a contractual meal or of a remembrance,
- may be behind accusations of cannibalism,
- a principle means of obtaining 'grace,'
- began to require special procedures for handling the "body" of Christ, and resulted in the exclusion of the laity from 'sacred' areas and rituals.

19. bishop/elders/deacons:

- Gr. meanings:
 - bishop: overseer, superintendent, guardian; an official of the Greek 'polis', i.e., the Greek city organization intended for the common good, somewhat like a comptroller or commissioner; also the overseer of a temple site,
 - elder, presbuteros, presbyter: usually an older more mature person selected for a leadership position because of their wisdom, knowledge, and exemplary life,
 - deacon: a servant or an assistant,
- in the NT the terms bishop and elder were applied to the same persons, one term reflected the Hebrew tradition and the other, the Greek,
- in the post apostolic period, the president of the group of elders, or presbyters, became known as the bishop,
- as the church grew, bishops became the single head of all the local christian congregations in a specific geographic area that was coterminous with the governmental divisions of civil government, such as the diocese or parish,
- eventually the bishop acquired separate and distinct powers and was believed to be the successor of an apostle,
- further development saw the marshaling of certain functions and powers, such as preaching or the selection of local presbyters, and oversight of smaller congregations within a civil jurisdiction, into the office of the bishop so that nothing could be done without the permission of the bishop,
- with some, eg. Irenaeus of Antioch, the bishop was seen in the role of Christ himself with other elders in the role of the 12 apostles,
- in some cases the role of the presbyter morphed into that of the church priest,
- eventually presbyters were squeezed out of the ecclesiastical structure and replaced by 'deacons', deacons became the bureaucrats of church administration, many with great power over church functions, and loyal only to the bishop; many bishops and even popes were selected from this group of deacons, or sometimes from civil positions,
- patriarch: the chief bishop in a specific governmental area with varying amounts of jurisdiction and honor over an important city of the empire and its related governmental region, such as Alexandria, Antioch, Rome, etc.

"LOGOS" in Greek Philosophy and the NT

logos, reason, logic, a treatise, what is spoken; an accounting of

logos, Wikipedia

a technical term in Western philosophy beginning with Heraclitus (c. 535 – c. 475 BC), a principle of order and knowledge; logos provided the link between rational discourse and the world's rational structure.

Aristotle: argument from reason, one of the three modes of persuasion. the logic behind an argument; reasoned discourse;

Stoic philosophers identified the term with the divine animating principle pervading the Universe, or the active reason pervading and animating the Universe. It was conceived as a (spiritual) material or principle and is usually identified with God or Nature. Humans each possess a portion of the divine logos.

Philo, 20 BC - 50 AD, an intermediary divine being or demiurge necessary to bridge the enormous gap between God and the material world; the highest of the intermediary beings, and called by Philo "the first-born of God"; "the Logos of the living God is the bond of everything, holding all things together and binding all the parts, and prevents them from being dissolved and separated".

logos, Britannica:

the divine reason implicit in the cosmos, ordering it and giving it form and meaning;

an active rational and spiritual principle that permeates all reality, also called in Gr. phil. the logos providence, nature, god, and the soul of the universe, and which is composed of many seminal logoi contained in the universal logos.

Early Church:

"The identification of Jesus with the logos, which is implied in various places in the New Testament but stated specifically in the Fourth Gospel, was further developed in the early church but more on the basis of Greek philosophical ideas than on Old Testament motifs. This development was dictated by attempts made by early Christian theologians and apologists to express the Christian faith in terms that would be intelligible to the Hellenistic world and to impress their hearers with the view that Christianity was superior to, or heir to, all that was best in pagan philosophy. Thus, in their apologies and polemical works, the early Christian Fathers stated that Christ as the preexistent logos (1) reveals the Father to mankind and is the subject of the Old Testament manifestations of God; (2) is the divine reason in which the whole human race shares, so that the 6th-century-bc philosopher and others who lived with reason were Christians before Christ; and (3) is the divine will and word by which the worlds were framed."

logos in John:

the divine word of God as spoken to the prophets and now revealed in the flesh.

logos in Augustine: Christ, the man in whom the 'logos' was present.

logos in Greek dictionaries:

a. in BAG (p. 477 ff.)

1. speaking, word, statement, question, a report, message, matter, thing, subj. of discussion;
2. computation, reckoning, account, settlement of an account, reason, motive,

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b. in William Greenfield. A Greek-English Lexicon To The New Testament (Kindle Locations 4199-4202).

a word, a thing uttered, Mat. 12.32, 37. 1 Co. 14.19;
speech, language, talk, Mat. 22.15. Lu. 20.20. 2 Co. 10.10. Ja. 3.2;
converse, Lu. 24.14;
mere talk, wordy show, 1 Co. 4.19, 20. Col. 2.23. 1 Jn. 3.18;
language, mode of discourse, style of speaking, Mat. 5.37. 1 Co. 1.17. 1 Th. 2.5;
a saying, a speech, Mar. 7.29. Eph. 4.29;
an expression, form of words, formula, Mat. 26.44. Ro. 13.9. Ga. 5.14;
a saying, a thing propounded in discourse, Mat. 7.24; 19.11. Jn. 4.37; 6.60. 1 Ti. 1.15, et al.;
a message, announcement, 2 Co. 5.19;
a prophetic announcement, Jn. 12.38;
an account, statement, 1 Pe. 3.15;
a story, report, Mat. 28.15. Jn. 4.39; 21.23; 2 Th. 2.2;
a written narrative, a treatise, Ac. 1.1;
a set discourse, Ac. 20.7; doctrine, Jn. 8.31, 27. 2 Ti. 2.17;
subject-matter, Ac. 15.6;
reckoning, account, Mat. 12.36; 18.23; 25.19. Lu. 16.2. Ac. 19.40; 20.24. Ro. 9.28. Phi. 4.15, 17. He. 4.13;
a plea, Mat. 5.32. Ac. 19.38;
a motive, Ac. 10.29;
reason, Ac. 18.14;
ὁ λόγος, the word of God, especially in the gospel, Mat. 13.21, 22. Mar. 16.20. Lu. 1.2. Ac. 6.4, et al.; ὁ λόγος, the divine Word, or Logos, Jn. 1.1.

Root words: William Greenfield. A Greek-English Lexicon To The New Testament (Kindle Locations 4134-4138).

lego: verb, to speak

to say, Mat. 1.20, et al. freq.;
to speak, make an address or speech, Ac. 26.1;
to say mentally, in thought, Mat. 3.9. Lu. 3.8;
to say in written language, Mar. 15.28. Lu. 1.63. Jno. 19.37, et al.;
to say, as distinguished from acting, Mat. 23.3;
to mention, speak of, Mar. 14.71. Lu. 9.31. Jno. 8.27;
to tell, declare, narrate, Mat. 21.27. Mar. 10.32;
to express, He. 5.11;
to put forth, propound, Lu. 5.36; 13.6. Jno. 16.29;
to mean, to intend to signify, 1 Co. 1.12; 10.29;
to say, declare, affirm, maintain, Mat. 3.9; 5.18. Mar. 12.18. Ac. 17.7; 26.22. 1 Co. 1.10, et al.;
to enjoin, Ac. 15.24; 21.21. Ro. 2.22; to term designate, call, Mat. 19.17. Mar. 12.37. Lu.

logidzomai: to count up or to calculate, William Greenfield. A Greek-English Lexicon To The New Testament (Kindle Locations 4191-4192).

to count, calculate; to count, enumerate, Mar. 15.28. Lu. 22.37;

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to set down as a matter of account, 1 Co. 13.5. 2 Co. 3.5; 12.6;
to impute, Ro. 4.3. 2 Co. 5.19. 2 Ti. 4.16, et al.;
to account, Ro. 2.26; 8.36;
(neg. sense) to be set at nought, despised, Ac. 19.27;
to regard, deem, consider, Ro. 6.11; 14.14. 1 Co. 4.1. 2 Co. 10.2. Phi. 3.13;
to infer, conclude, presume, Ro. 2.3; 3.28; 8.18. 2 Co. 10.2, 7, 11. He. 11.19. 1 Pe. 5.12;
to think upon, ponder, Phi. 4.8;
to reason, Mar. 11.31. 1 Co. 13.11.

Another Gr. word for “Word.”

rhema, a spoken word.

that which is spoken; a declaration, saying, speech, word, Mat. 12.36; 26.75. Mar. 9.32; 14.72;
a command, mandate, direction, Lu. 3.2; 5.5;
a promise, Lu. 1.38; 2.29;
a prediction, prophecy, 2 Pe. 3.2;
a doctrine of God or Christ, Jno. 3.34; 5.47; 6.63, 68. Ac. 5.20;
an accusation, charge, crimination, Mat. 5.11; 27.14;
from the Heb., a thing, Mat. 4.4. Lu. 4.4;
a matter, affair, transaction, business, Mat.

William Greenfield. A Greek-English Lexicon To The New Testament (Kindle Locations 6125-6128).