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Ye are Gods: Clement of Alexandria's Doctrine of Deification

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Clement of Alexandria (150 C.E. to 215 C.E.) was born into a pagan home. His full name was Titus Flavius Clemens. He came from ancestry that was believed to have had considerable wealth and property.¹ Clement spent much of his younger life in Athens, where he was introduced to many Greek philosophical schools such as Platonic, Stoic, Cynic, Pythagorean, and Epicurean thought. When Clement became a Christian he denounced Epicureanism, although he never abandoned all Greek philosophy.² He traveled exploring Greek mystery cults³ and increasing his knowledge of both philosophy and Christianity. Clement reached Alexandria, where he eventually became the leader of the Alexandrian church. Clement became one of the Alexandrian church’s most influential theologians. He also left a theological legacy that is still influential in Orthodox churches today. One of Clement’s doctrines which influenced the theology of Christianity was his belief in the deification of man/woman. The thesis that this article will endeavor to advance is that Clement of Alexandria’s model of deification exalts a deified individual to the status of a god who is less than the Father in honor, similar to Christ, and superior to all other beings in the cosmos.

Deification was a very significant concept for Clement of Alexandria. Though he borrowed themes from Justin and Irenaeus, he became the father of much of the specialized vocabulary pertaining to deification used by later Christians.⁴ Clement made claims of humankind’s eventual deification that were anything but subtle. “I say, the Word of God became a man, so that you might learn from a man how to become a god”⁵ and “men are gods and gods

² Tollington, *Clement*, 2.
men.”

For Clement, mortals who turn to the truth become gods, and those gods never cease being gods. Deification is the object of existence and the archetype of perfection in the afterlife. Clement’s choice scripture used to defend the doctrine of deification is Psalms 82:6, in which he emphasizes the fact that the believer becomes an adopted son of God through following the example of the Lord: “This is what happens to us, whose model the Lord made Himself. When we are baptized, we are enlightened; being enlightened, we become sons; becoming adopted sons, we are made perfect; and becoming perfect, we are made divine. ‘I have said,’ it is written, ‘you are gods and all of you the sons of the most High.’”

Clement’s attitude seems very optimistic. According to Clement, God gives mortals a model to follow. Mortals who follow that model receive further knowledge until they are adopted as sons of God who become perfected and divinized. However, does Clement really believe that the faithful believer can become as the Supreme Creator? For example, he states that “God alone created, since he alone is truly God.”

The question becomes more problematic when we realize that for Clement God is imageless, beyond space and time, not made of material matter, not subject to limit or division, not found in any section, and having no natural attitude toward us. In fact, mortals cannot understand God by words or thoughts. Even scriptural teaching is incapable of describing God, for he is entirely ineffable. God cannot be described by what he is, only by what He is not. Furthermore, although one can reach the pinnacle of progress by being called his son, we are not his children by nature. Even Clement himself asks the question, “how could a creature subject to birth draw near to the unborn

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11. Clement, Clement of Alexandria: Books One Through Three (trans. John Ferguson; Washington: Catholic University, 1991), 160. See also Henny F. Hagg, who makes a list of the most common negative adjectives found in Stromateis: invisible, eternal, indivisible, incomprehensible, infinite or without limit, unknown, unbegotten, without name, inexpessible and unspeakeable, unutterable, unmade, without beginning, without form, uncontained, without passion, without need, incorruptible, and incapable of being circumscribed (p. 159).
13. Clement, Books One Through Three, 207. See also 208. Unfortunately, Clement believes “puzzling questions must have puzzling answers.” For example, Clement quotes the following dialogue told by an Indian Gymnosophist “How [is it possible that] any one of men could become a God?” The answer is: “if he does what it is impossible for man to do” (Roberts and Donaldson, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, 493).
and uncreated?”14 Clement puts us in a theological quandary by combining a “highly optimistic anthropology with an apophatic theology.”15 So how can Clement’s seemingly disparate ontological and eschatological beliefs be reconciled?

First, we have to consider that Clement uses terms of deified beings in two different contexts. In the first context, Clement believed that one could become a god during mortality. In the second context, he believed one could become an immortal god in the afterlife. Clement explains mortal deification lucidly towards the end of Stromateis when he says:

And just as Ischomachus will make those who attend to his instructions husbandmen, and Lampis sea-captains, and Charidemus commanders, and Simon horsemen, and Perdix hucksters, and Crobylus cooks, and Archelaus dancers, and Homer poets, and Pyrrho wranglers, and Demosthenes orators, and Chrysippus logicians, and Aristototele men of science, and Plato philosophers, so he who obeys the Lord and follows the prophecy given through Him, is fully perfected after the likeness of his Teacher, and thus becomes a god while still moving about in the flesh. 16

Clement’s reasoning is practical. If God lives the teachings he gives, and mortals fully live those teachings, then mortals become like God through imitation. Just as the disciples of Plato become philosophers, the disciples of God become gods. Clement posits his belief that mortals can be a god in this life similar to the Son by mentioning many similarities between mortals and the mortal Logos. Mortals can have the same beauty as the mortal Logos (Educat. 3.2)17. The faithful Christian can also receive the new name or title of “sons of God” which is similar to Christ being the Son of God. Clement explains that “this is the greatest progress of all.”18 Just as Christ was washed in baptism, so his followers are washed.19 Just as the Christ was anointed with the oil of gladness, so are his followers “anointed with the oil of gladness, the incorruptible oil of good odor.”20 Mortals should exert themselves so that they may receive a crown just as Christ, the true athlete will be crowned in the theater of the universe.21 Clement even goes so far as to say that one should be like Christ by being clothed in white garments and thus “put on Christ.”22 For Clement the goal is to be as far as possible assimilated to God. Clement believes that one may even acquire the character of the Logos. One may do this by simply “practicing to be a god.”23 Clement sees us as having in the Lord “an unmistakable

model for how to live our lives,” in fact, we are “treading in the footsteps of God.” For Clement, wearing white garments is a symbolic expression of commitment to Christ.” Clement seems to believe that while one could never fully be like the Father, it is entirely possible to be very close to the Son during mortality. After all, he stated that humankind was not really created after the image of the supreme God, but rather after the image of his Son.

For Clement the theme of deification like Christ also exists in the afterlife. Clement believes that the faithful are to become immortal as the resurrected Christ is immortal. Because mortal men/women are beautiful as the mortal Christ is beautiful, immortal beings will also become beautiful because they are after the image of God. Furthermore, Clement believed that the immortal believer could be similarly free from passions as the immortal Christ. Clement helped to clarify what he meant by being a god when he said:

This knowledge leads us on to that perfect end which knows no end, teaching us here the nature of the life we shall hereafter live with gods according to the will of God, when we have been delivered from all chastisement and punishment, which we have to endure as salutary chastening in consequence of our sins. After this deliverance rank and honors are assigned to those who are perfected, who have done now with purification and all other ritual, though it be holy among the holy; until at last, when they have been made pure in heart by their closeness to the Lord, the final restoration attends on their everlasting contemplation of God. And the name of gods is given to those that shall hereafter be enthroned with the other gods, who first had their station assigned to them beneath the Savior.

Clement believed that those who sought godly knowledge, paid the price for their sins, and became free from passion, would be similar to the Savior in the afterlife. The faithful would be assigned rank, honor, thrones and everlasting knowledge. Not only would the faithful have similar characteristics and honors, but they would be given a new name similar to Christ’s name. They would be assigned the name of a god. Astonishingly, Clement asserts that the righteous will even become judges in the afterlife. However, though immortal beings are similar to the immortal Christ in many respects, they will still always be lower in honor and rank. Nevertheless, Clement confessed that those deified

26. Clement, *The Educator*, 243–4. Clement says that wearing white from head to foot symbolizes the following: staying spiritually clean, putting away all wicked dispositions, being a person of peace and light, it is the color of truth, and lastly “there is no deed more indicative of a good [person] than wearing such a garment” for that is how we “put on Jesus Christ.”
29. Clement, *Clement D’Alexandrie Stromate IV.*
will be “assimilated as far as possible to the Second Cause,” who is Christ.\footnote{32}

Although it seems that Clement believed that an individual could be deified below the Father and the Son, Clement’s concept of deification can still seem ambiguous unless it is put in the proper context of his idea of the heavens and cosmos. For one’s deification to be understood, it must be compared to the highest rank of beings (the Father and the Son), and also to any lower creatures or stages of salvation. After all, Clement believed in a universe filled with multiple gradations of saved beings and many mystic stages of advancement.\footnote{33} The question that must be asked in order to fully understand Clement’s concept of deification is where does a deified individual fit in the context of these different levels of advancement and salvation? Before the latter question can be answered, Clement’s different levels of salvation must be defined.

In \textit{Stromateis}, Clement specifically describes three stages of advancement and salvation.\footnote{34} In the afterlife there are those who are “beyond salvation,” those who are saved, and those who “are dignified with the highest honor after being saved.”\footnote{35} In two passages, Clement elucidates what the cosmos are like and defines the roles of the many beings at work in the process of Salvation. Clement uses a wrestler in an amphitheatre to help elaborate his doctrine:

Here then we find the True wrestler, who in the amphitheatre of this fair universe is crowned for the true victory over his passions. For the president is God Almighty, and the umpire is the only-begotten Son of God, and the spectators are angels and gods, and our great contest of all arms is not waged against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual powers of passionate affections working in the flesh. When [a person] has come safe out of these mighty conflicts, and overthrown the tempter in the combats to which he has challenged us, the Christian soldier wins immortality. For the decision of God is unerring in regard to His most righteous award. The spectators then have been summoned to view the contest; the wrestlers are contending in the arena, and now the prize is won by him amongst them, who has been obedient to the orders of the trainer. . . . And the maxim \textit{know thyself} means in this case, to know for what purpose we are made. Now we are made to be obedient to the commandments, if our choice be such as to will salvation.\footnote{36}

And [the Son] pilots all in safety according to \textit{the Fathers will}, rank being subordinated to rank under different leaders, till in the end \textit{the Great High Priest} is reached. For one original principal, which works in accordance with \textit{the Father’s will}, depend the first and second and third gradations; and then at the extreme end of the visible world there is the blessed ordinance of angels; and so, even down to ourselves, ranks below ranks are appointed, all saving and being saved by the instrumentality of One. . . . Again [the gods] ordained that the soul that at any time improved

36. Clement, \textit{The Seventh Book}, 33.}
as regard the knowledge of virtue and increase in righteousness, should obtain an improved position in the universe, pressing onwards at every step to a passionless state, until it comes to a perfect man, a preeminence at once of knowledge and of inheritance. These saving revolutions are each severally portioned off. According to the order of change, by variety of time and place and honor and knowledge and inheritance and service, up to the transcendent orbit which is next to the Lord occupied in eternal contemplation. 37

In the preceding passage, Clement seems to have given angels and gods the same gradation of salvation. Clement’s discussion seems to point to angels fulfilling similar responsibilities as God. Out of the three gradations of progression mentioned in the passage, it is implied that angels and gods pertain to the highest order because their role is just below the Father and his Son. Those who eventually receive the stewardship of angels and gods assist the Father and the Logos in bringing to pass the advancement and salvation of those who are mortal. Clement explains that those who reach the end of perfection are resurrected and immortal. Thus gods have resurrected bodies. Furthermore, gods can be contrasted with angels who do not have a body. 38 If one wishes to merely be saved, one must have faith in Christ, but if one wishes to become a son of God, one must suffer until he is purged of each transgression. 39 Thus the sons of God, which are gods, pass through greater suffering to obtain their godhood. 40

Clement describes the order of Christ’s earthly church as having three grades, namely bishops, presbyters, and deacons. He states that these offices are “in imitation of the angelic glory.” 41 Interestingly, even the heathen could know a bit of heaven by considering the sun, moon, and stars. 42 Clement did not believe the soul would be a god or angel in an instant. Souls must pass through different saving revolutions until at last they reach the highest degree of salvation and godhood. 43 Those who are saved can only reach godhood through promotion. One who is saved must first minister as a deacon, then a presbyter, and then keep progressing until they “grow into a perfect man.” 44 Thus Clement makes the distinction between those who are deified and all other saved beings. One who is deified is greater than the other saved beings, as a bishop

39. Alexander and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 505. Clement also points out that one must know God rather than simply believe, if one is to receive the highest honor “after being saved, which is greater than being saved.” One is saved by degrees in proportion to his faith.
43. Clement, *The Seventh Book*, 17–18. In a way, Clement saw salvation similar to climbing a ladder, with each new step being a higher level of faith. He stated, “The Lord is the one and only charioteer who conducts each of us ‘from faith to faith’ progressively to salvation” (Clement, *Books One Through Three*, 240).
is greater than a presbyter or a deacon. He makes it clear that just as the sun differs in glory from the moon and the stars, so is the deification of man/woman. Those sons of God, who are gods, are also distinguished by pertaining to a heavenly church that belongs only to the gods and angels.

For in what way is a stranger permitted to enter [the kingdom of heaven]? Well, as I take it, then, when he is enrolled and made a citizen, and receives one to stand to him in the relation to the Father, then will he be occupied with the Fathers concerns, Then will he share the kingdom of the Father with His own dear Son. For this is the first-born Church, composed of many good children; these are “the first-born enrolled in heaven, who hold high festival with so many myriad of angels.” . . . And now the more benevolent God is, the more impious men are; for He desires us from slaves to become sons, while they scorn to become sons. O the prodigious folly of being ashamed of the Lord! He offers freedom, you flee into bondage; He bestows salvation, you sink down into destruction; He confers everlasting life, you wait for punishment, and prefer the fire, which the Lord “has prepared for the devil and his angels.”

At this juncture, Clement introduces a gradation which does not pertain to salvation at all, but rather destruction. Those members of the heavenly “first-born church” are contrasted with those who suffer with the devil and his angels. In the “first-born church” the saved are gods, enjoy freedom, everlasting life, the company of angels, and inherit the kingdom of the Father. On the contrary, those who are ashamed of the Lord receive bondage, destruction, punishment, sharing their existence with the devil and his angels.

In conclusion, Clement of Alexandria believed that an individual could become a god who is less than the Father in honor, similar to the Son, and greater than all other beings in the universe. Clement’s seemingly conflicting ideas are bold with respect to the anthropology and eschatology of the faithful Christian. Due to Clement’s premises, a deified individual can never supersede the Father or the Son, yet can become comparable to the Son in many ways. For Clement personal deification was the object of existence and the final aim in the worship of God.