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Part II: Early Christian Belief in an Embodied God

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The Good Shepherd Separates the Sheep from the Goats. Mosaic, ca. 520 A.D. Saint Apollinare Nuovo Church, Ravenna, Italy. Courtesy Alinari/Art Resource, N.Y.

In the years after Constantine took control of the Christian Church, two traditions in Christian art competed for primacy—the Oriental (Near Eastern) and the Greco-Roman. The depiction of Christ in this mosaic reflects the Greco-Roman tradition. Christ is shown as a beardless youth or young man. The figure type and the design of Christ's halo reflect earlier depictions of Apollo, the sun god of the classical world. The Apollonian visual pattern for the depiction of Christ eventually lost out but was partially revived when the Italian Renaissance looked to the classical tradition for both aesthetics and ideas. Thus for the Sistine Chapel *Last Judgment*, Michaelangelo follows the early Apollo model for Christ but pushes that model further by depicting Christ seminude.

The medium of mosaic accentuated a style reinforced by the Neoplatonism that had become part of Christian theology. This tradition downplayed the physical world because the physical was transitory and fallen. Mosaic as a medium maintains the integrity of the surface plane of the picture and diminishes the depth of vision with the result that figures become almost two dimensional instead of three dimensional. Thus the figures are kept as symbols while their corporeal reality is reduced.

Part II

Early Christian Belief in an Embodied God

Ample evidence, especially that from early Christian immaterialists, shows that biblical peoples, Jews, and early Christians understood God to be an embodied person.

The view that God is incorporeal, without body or parts, has been the hallmark of Christian orthodoxy for centuries, yet Joseph Smith claimed that he restored the doctrine of divine embodiment found in the primitive Christian understanding.⁸² In this section, I argue that Joseph is correct; that is, not only did the very earliest Christians believe God to be embodied in human-like form, but this belief continued to be widely held by Christians for at least the first four centuries after the death of Jesus Christ. The belief was gradually abandoned as Platonism became more and more entrenched as the dominant metaphysical world view of Christian thinkers.⁸³

Some of the evidence I cite is indirect and circumstantial, but when all is considered cumulatively, it seems quite convincing. Ironically, much of this evidence is drawn from the writings of two of the most uncompromising incorporealists, Origen and Augustine. Given their strong opposition to the doctrine of divine embodiment, the evidence they provide is particularly persuasive.

Primitive Christian Belief in an Embodied Deity

That the earliest Christians believed God to be embodied is admitted by the noted Church historian Adolph Harnack, though he buries this admission in two footnotes in his seven-volume

⁸²See Donald Q. Cannon, Larry E. Dahl, and John W. Welch, "The Restoration of Major Doctrines through Joseph Smith: The Godhead, Mankind, and the Creation," *Ensign* 19 (January 1989): 27-33.

⁸³For a historical study of the introduction of Platonism into early Christian thought and its rise to preeminence among Christian thinkers, see Robert P. Casey, "Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Platonism," *Harvard Theological Review* 18 (1925): 39-101; and Robert M. Grant, *The Early Christian Doctrine of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1966).

work, *History of Dogma*. Writing about first-century believers, he explains:

God was naturally conceived and represented as corporeal by uncultured Christians, though not by these alone, as the later controversies prove (e.g., Orig. *contra Melito*; see also Tertull. *De anima*). In the case of the cultured, the idea of a corporeality of God may be traced back to Stoic influences; in the case of the uncultured, popular ideas co-operated with the sayings of the Old Testament literally understood, and the impression of the Apocalyptic images.⁸⁴

He further concedes, “In the second century . . . realistic eschatological ideas no doubt continued to foster in wide circles the popular idea that God had a form and a kind of corporeal existence.”⁸⁵

Harnack identifies several possible sources of primitive⁸⁶ Christian belief in an embodied deity including popular religious ideas, Stoic metaphysics, and Old Testament scripture, literally construed. It is common knowledge that ordinary persons, including the early Greeks,⁸⁷ have always (as Harnack suggests) naturally conceived God (or the gods) to be embodied. Further, Harnack proposes that Christians influenced by Stoic views could have reached the same conclusion on metaphysical grounds. From the Stoic beliefs that only matter is real and that God is real, it follows that God is a material being.⁸⁸

⁸⁴Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 7 vols. (New York: Dover, 1961), 1:180 n. 1.

⁸⁵Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 2:255 n. 5.

⁸⁶The primitive period of the Christian Church is usually understood to last from the apostolic years to the middle of the second century. See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed., rev. (London: Adams and Charles Black, 1977), 31-35.

⁸⁷See Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955), 9-10. For an excellent study of the popular Greek understanding of the gods, see Martin P. Nilsson, *Greek Folk Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972).

⁸⁸Stoicism, founded by Zeno of Citium, ca. 300 B.C.,

was mostly a closely knit system of logic, metaphysics, and ethics. . . . From the theological point of view, however, what was most remarkable about it was its pantheistic materialism. The Stoics reacted vigorously against the Platonic differentiation of a transcendent, intelligible world not perceptible by the senses from the ordinary world of sensible experience. Whatever exists, they argued, must be body, and the universe as a whole must be through and through

Whatever the impact of popular belief and Stoic metaphysics on the primitive Christian understanding of God, perhaps a more significant influence was the Hebrew Bible. J. N. D. Kelly informs us, “from the apostolic age to the middle of the second century . . . there was as yet no officially sanctioned New Testament canon.”⁸⁹ Indeed, “for the first hundred years, at least, of its history the Church’s Scriptures, in the precise sense of the word, consisted exclusively of the Old Testament.”⁹⁰ And as Harnack has reminded us, the Old Testament literally construed describes God in decidedly anthropomorphic terms. For example, Edmond Cherbonnier has shown that the God of biblical revelation, in contrast with the deity of Platonist metaphysics, was personal, not abstract; invisible as a matter of choice, not inherently; everlasting or enduring through time, not timeless; and ethically constant, not metaphysically immutable. He concludes that in many respects, the God of the Bible has more in common with the gods of the Greek and Roman pantheon than with Plato’s idea of ultimate Being or Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover.⁹¹

More to the point, many biblical passages straightforwardly describe God as embodied. For instance, Genesis 1:26 records that God made man “in our own image, after our likeness.”⁹² Even more explicit are the many references to God’s body parts, such as “I [Jacob] have seen God face to face” (Gen. 32:30); “they saw the

material. . . . Thus Stoicism was a monism teaching that God or Logos is a finer matter immanent in the material universe. (Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 17–18)

⁸⁹Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 31.

⁹⁰Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 52.

⁹¹See Edmond La Beaume Cherbonnier, “The Logic of Biblical Anthropomorphism,” *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962): 187; and Cherbonnier, “In Defense of Anthropomorphism,” in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judeo-Christian Parallels*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 155–73. Cherbonnier provides a clear description of the anthropomorphic God of the biblical record, particularly in contrast with later mystical or Platonist views of deity.

⁹²Umberto Cassuto explains that “there is no doubt that the original signification of this expression in the Canaanite tongue was, judging by Babylonian usage, corporeal, in accordance with the anthropomorphic conception of the godhead among the peoples of the ancient East.” Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961), 1:56.

God of Israel: and there was under his feet” (Ex. 24:10); “the Lord spake unto Moses face to face” (Ex. 33:11); and “I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen” (Ex. 33:23). God also appears embodied in New Testament accounts of divine appearances. For instance, Acts 7:56 tells of Stephen seeing God and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God.⁹³ It is hard to imagine a being with a face, feet, hands, and back parts but without a body.

Though on the basis of scriptures such as these, early Christians no doubt simply took it for granted that God has a body similar to man’s, this belief does not mean they thought of God as similar to man in all respects. Unlike man, for example, God is holy, as Hosea 11:9 states: “For I am God, and not man; the Holy One in the midst of thee.” Cherbonnier acknowledges that a considerable variety exists in scripture and that this and similar passages do point away from an overly simple anthropomorphism. However, these passages do not indicate that the later biblical prophets gave up the ideas that God has a body and that man’s body was created in his image. To the contrary, Cherbonnier claims that modern scholarship, “by restoring these [anthropomorphic] passages to their context and so recovering their original meaning, reverses such an interpretation.”⁹⁴

Only after divine embodiment was rejected on philosophical (primarily Platonist) grounds was the image of God identified with the soul or the rational aspect of the soul, and biblical passages referring to God’s body or bodily parts were explicitly given figurative interpretations. While the philosophical critique of anthropomorphic conceptions of deity has its roots in ancient Greece and while there is evidence that anthropomorphism was an issue for the translators of the Septuagint,⁹⁵ a Jewish Platonist educated

⁹³Consider also the postascension appearances of the resurrected Christ to Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3–7), to John the Beloved on the Isle of Patmos (Rev. 1:10–18), and to many others who saw the resurrected Lord (1 Cor. 15:5–8).

⁹⁴Cherbonnier, “Biblical Anthropomorphism,” 188.

⁹⁵See B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, The Way, The Life* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1994), 173 n. 1; and Harry M. Orlinsky, “Introductory Essay: On Anthropomorphisms and Anthropopathisms in the Septuagint and Targum,” in Bernard M. Zlotowitz, *The Septuagint Translation of the Hebrew Terms in Relation to God in the Book of Jeremiah* (New York: KTAV, 1981), xxv–xxvi.

in Alexandria named Philo Judaeus (20 B.C.–A.D. 40) appears to be the first who applied allegorical interpretations to the anthropomorphic passages in the Old Testament. Philo's views were not generally accepted by his mainstream Jewish contemporaries. However, Albinus, a second-century non-Christian and middle-Platonist, did follow Philo's lead and, in turn, greatly influenced Origen and later Christian thinkers.⁹⁶

Aside from direct revelation as a source for the primitive Christian belief that God is embodied, Harnack fails to mention another, no doubt powerful, influence—the understanding of God within the first-century, Jewish communities out of which Christianity first emerged. According to J. N. D. Kelly,

Judaism was the cradle in which Christianity was nurtured, the source to which it was uniquely indebted. It left a deep imprint, as is generally agreed, on the Church's liturgy and ministry, and an even deeper one on its teaching. In evaluating this impact, we must take account both of Palestinian Judaism and of the Hellenized version current at Alexandria. The former can be dealt with quite briefly, for the heyday of its influence falls outside this book in the apostolic age, when it moulded the thought of all New Testament writers. Yet, in spite of the early rupture between Christians and Jews, it would be a grave error to dismiss it as a negligible force in our period. Until the middle of the second century, when Hellenistic ideas began to come to the fore, Christian theology was taking shape in predominantly Judaistic moulds, and the categories of thought used by almost all Christian writers before the Apologists were largely Jewish.⁹⁷

⁹⁶For an insightful examination of the reasons why the later church fathers rejected the primitive view of a corporeal deity, see Grace Jantzen, "Theological Tradition and Divine Incorporeality," *God's World, God's Body* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1984), 21–35.

⁹⁷Kelly, "Early Christian Doctrines," 6. Jacob Neusner has cautioned against the presumption that this "Judaistic mould" was all of one piece. He asks:

Can we identify one Judaism in the first centuries BCE and CE? Only if we can treat as a single cogent statement everything all Jews wrote. That requires us to harmonize the Essene writings of the Dead Sea, Philo, the Mishnah, the variety of scriptures collected in our century as the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament, not to mention the Gospels! This is to say, viewed as statements of systems, the writings attest to diverse religious systems, and, in the setting of which we speak, to diverse Judaisms. There was no one orthodoxy, no Orthodox Judaism. There were various Judaisms. (Jacob Neusner, "Judaism and Christianity in the First Century: How Shall We Perceive Their Relationship?" in *A Tribute to Geza Vermes: Essays on*

Those early Jewish (and subsequently Christian) categories, based as they were upon a literal reading of the Hebrew scriptures, were unabashedly anthropomorphic.⁹⁸ For instance, James Drummond admits that even as the Jews advanced theologically to a higher conception of God, “we can hardly doubt that the mass of the people would be satisfied with [the scriptures’] literal meaning, and that their idea of God was the purest anthropomorphism.”⁹⁹ Similarly, George Foot Moore claims that Palestinian Judaism was “innocent . . . of an ‘abstract’ or ‘transcendent’—or any other sort of a philosophical—idea of God.”¹⁰⁰ Indeed, he asserts, “the philosophical horror of ‘anthropomorphisms’ which Philo . . . entertained was unknown to the Palestinian schools. They endeavored to think of God worthily and to speak of him reverently; but their criterion was the Scripture and the instinct of piety, not an alien metaphysics.”¹⁰¹ Thoroughly influencing the basic concepts of formative Judaism was, indeed, the understanding of God’s “incarnation,” which Jacob Neusner describes “as a commonplace for Judaisms from the formation of Scripture forward.”¹⁰² By incarnation, Neusner means “the representation of

Jewish and Christian Literature and History, eds. Philip R. Davies and Richard T. White [Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990], 256)

Nonetheless, E. P. Sanders argues that there was, at least within first-century Palestinian Judaism, a common theological core underlying all this rich diversity of thought and practice. *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE to 66 CE* (London: SCM, 1992), 240–78.

⁹⁸“Jewish anthropomorphism seems to have been notorious in the first centuries C.E.” Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa, “Form(s) of God: Some Notes on Metatron and Christ,” *Harvard Theological Review* 76 (1983): 269–88, 271.

⁹⁹James Drummond, *Philo Judaeus; or, The Jewish-Alexandrian Philosophy in Its Development and Completion*, 2 vols. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1888), 1:135.

¹⁰⁰George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 1:421. For a recent treatment of this topic see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 13–51.

¹⁰¹Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, 1:438.

¹⁰²Jacob Neusner, *The Incarnation of God: The Character of Divinity in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 4.

God in the flesh, as corporeal, consubstantial in emotion and virtue with human beings, and sharing in the modes and means of action carried out by mortals, . . . doing deeds that women and men do in the way in which they do them.”¹⁰³ So powerful and natural was Judaism’s “rich legacy of anthropomorphism”¹⁰⁴ that Rabbi Hoshaiah could tell a story about the time when God came to create man and how the ministering angels mistook Adam for God: “What did the Holy One, blessed be he, do? He put him to sleep, so everyone knew that he was a mere man.”¹⁰⁵ Of course, in this portrayal of divinity the purpose was never to confuse God with man but rather to teach an understanding “that draws humanity upward and does not bring God downward.”¹⁰⁶

Nowhere is this Jewish anthropomorphism more evident than in the teachings of several classical rabbis. For instance, in his recently published study, Alon Goshen Gottstein claims:

In all of rabbinic literature [covering both the tannaitic (70–200 A.D.) and amoraic (220–500 A.D.) periods] there is not a single statement that categorically denies that God has body or form. In my understanding, the question of whether the rabbis believed in a God who has form is one that needs little discussion. . . . Instead of asking, “Does God have a body?” we should inquire, “What kind of body does God have?”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³Neusner, *Incarnation of God*, 12, 17.

¹⁰⁴Neusner, *Incarnation of God*, 6.

¹⁰⁵Genesis Rabbah 8:10, quoted in Neusner, *Incarnation of God*, 3. In addition, it was reported at a 1995 conference in Jerusalem, sponsored by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, that an unpublished Dead Sea Scrolls fragment, 4Q416 frg. 1, speaks of God as a creature of flesh. Although the Dead Sea Scrolls are not necessarily a part of the rabbinic tradition, we await publication and further analysis of that fragment by T. Elgvin.

¹⁰⁶Neusner, *Incarnation of God*, 3. The tractate *Shi’ur Koma* (The Measure of the Body) describes God’s body in huge proportions. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 14:1417, s.v. “Shi’ur Koma.” A widely acknowledged source for studies of Jewish anthropomorphism, this tractate is from the period of the Tannaim and is associated with Kabbalah, but its concepts are known in rabbinic midrashim.

¹⁰⁷Alon Goshen Gottstein, “The Body as Image of God in Rabbinic Literature,” *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994): 172. See also Arthur Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God* (1937; reprint, New York: Ktav, 1968), which deals with the literal versus allegorical interpretation of scripture in rabbinic tradition. While Marmorstein suggests that the rabbis were generally moving away from anthropomorphic conceptions of God, he does *not* indicate that they were moving away from the idea that God is embodied.

Gottstein further contends, “The bodily meaning is the only meaning of *zelem* [image] in rabbinic literature. This suggestion is borne out in all tannaitic and amoraic sources.”¹⁰⁸

The rabbinic interpretation of the image of God as referring to the body is clearly shown in this representative selection, a story about Rabbi Hillel:

His disciples asked him: “Master, whither are you bound?” He answered them: “To perform a religious duty.” “What,” they asked, “is this religious duty?” He said to them, “To wash in the bath-house.” Said they: “Is this a religious duty?” “Yes,” he replied, “if the statues of kings, which are erected in theatres and circuses, are scoured and washed by the man who is appointed to look after them, and who thereby obtains his maintenance through them—nay more, he is exalted in the company of the great of the kingdom—how much more I, who have been created in the Image and Likeness.”¹⁰⁹

Rabbinic anthropomorphism so strikingly contrasts with later (third century on) Christian immaterialism and so closely parallels Joseph Smith’s understanding of God that it will be helpful to summarize Gottstein’s account of the rabbinic concepts in some detail.

First, Gottstein shows that rabbinic anthropomorphism was not a crude notion in which God’s body (or even Adam’s body created in its image) was seen as identical or very similar to our present fallen human bodies.¹¹⁰ For example, one rabbinic account describes Adam’s body as one of great beauty and light:

Resh Lakish, in the name of R. Simen the son of Menasya, said: “The apple of Adam’s heel outshone the globe of the sun; how much more so the brightness of his face! Nor need you wonder. In the ordinary way if a person makes salvers [servants], one for himself and one for his household, whose will he make more beautiful? Not his own? Similarly, Adam was created for the service of the Holy One, blessed be He, and the globe of the sun for the service of mankind.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸Gottstein, “Body as Image of God,” 174; italics in original. Gottstein acknowledges that in the later *Tanbuma* literature, several paraphrases expand the meaning of *zelem* to include eternal life, divine glory, and righteous behavior. None of these expansions overrides the older understanding of *zelem* as body but rather are derived from it (174 n. 9).

¹⁰⁹Leviticus Rabbah 34:3, in *Midrash Rabbah*, trans. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, 10 vols. (London: Soncino, 1983), 4:428.

¹¹⁰Gottstein, “Body as Image of God,” 183–86.

¹¹¹Leviticus Rabbah 20:2, in *Midrash Rabbah*, 4:252. Other texts corroborate Adam’s possessing a body of light: Genesis Rabbah 12:6, in *Midrash Rabbah*,

Thus Adam's original body was more radiant than the sun, but God's body, in whose image Adam's was made, is still more brilliant and beautiful;¹¹² though it resembles the human body in form, it differs from it in function. Gottstein quotes a passage from Peter in the Jewish-Christian *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies* that parallels notions found in *Sefer Yezira*:

He has the most beautiful Form for the sake of man, in order that the pure in heart shall be able to see Him, that they shall rejoice on account of whatever they have endured. For He has stamped man as it were with the greatest seal, with His own Form, in order that he shall rule and be lord over all things, and that all things shall serve him. For this reason, he who having judged that He is the All and man His image (*eikon*)—He being invisible and His image, man, visible—will honor the image, which is man.¹¹³

Next, Gottstein proposes a model for reconciling apparently contradictory rabbinic passages pertaining to the issue of whether man, as the result of sin, lost the image of God:

As we have seen, Adam's *zelem* is his luminous body. In other sources, such as the story of Hillel washing his body, the *zelem* referred to the physical body. *Zelem* can thus refer to various levels,

1:91; Ecclesiastes Rabbah 8:1, in *Midrash Rabbah*, 8:213; and Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:3, in *Midrash Rabbah*, 7:173.

¹¹²Compare Joseph Smith's description of the brilliance of God's body. In his 1838 account of the First Vision, he told of a light "above the brightness of the sun" and attempted to describe the Father and the Son "whose brightness and glory defy all description" (JS-H 1:16-17). Compare also the language that Zebedee Coltrin (Joseph's LDS contemporary) used to describe God (for example, "surrounded as with a flame of fire," "consuming fire of great brightness," and "flame of fire which was so brilliant") with the rabbinic descriptions of the divine body. Statement of Zebedee Coltrin, October 3, 1883, *School of Propbets*, 38. A fuller description of Coltrin's theophany is set out in point 3 of the section on external corroborative evidence.

¹¹³This passage is from a section of the homilies recently translated and discussed by Shlomo Pines in "Points of Similarity between the Exposition of the Doctrine of the Sefirot in the Sefer Yezira and a Text of the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies: The Implications of this Resemblance," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 7 (1989): 64-65. "Pines . . . considers the last sentence a later gloss, for it contradicts the possibility of seeing the divine form." Gottstein, however, conjectures that "'invisible' may refer to the ordinary state, and not to the exceptional condition that the pure-hearted ones attain." Gottstein, "Body as Image of God," 173 n. 5.

or aspects, all of which bear a resemblance to the physical body. I would propose that these various levels, or various bodies, reflect one another. The physical body is a reflection of the body of light. . . . [A] kind of graded devolutionary process . . . may be a model for two ways of talking about *zelem*. The *zelem* in its original form may be lost, but the dimmer reflection of this form is extant in the physical body, which may still be spoken of as *zelem*.¹¹⁴

Finally, Gottstein ventures a partial explanation of why the rabbinic interpretation of *image* is exclusively bodily compared with the subsequent nonbodily interpretations given by Christian immaterialists. Rabbinic anthropology did not consider the soul to be immaterial or radically distinct from the body, as Platonists held it to be. He elaborates:

Rabbinic anthropology differs . . . from Hellenistic and later Christian anthropology. The distinction between Spirit and matter is not known in Rabbinic literature¹¹⁵. . . . metaphysically soul and body form a whole, rather than a polarity. Crudely put, the soul is like the battery that operates an electronic gadget. It may be different and originally external to the gadget, but the difference is not one of essence. . . . More significantly, the gadget and its power source ultimately belong together, rather than apart. Thus, the soul is the vitalizing agent, whose proper place is in the body, not out of it.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴Gottstein, "Body as Image of God," 188.

¹¹⁵Compare Doctrine and Covenants 131:6-7: "There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All Spirit is matter, but it is more fine and pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes. We cannot see it; but when our bodies are purified, we shall see that it is all matter."

¹¹⁶Gottstein, "Body as Image of God," 176-77. Compare Doctrine and Covenants 93:33: "For man is spirit. The elements are eternal, and spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fulness of joy." Joseph further explained his beliefs about spirit:

In tracing the thing to the foundation, and looking at it philosophically, we shall find a very material difference between the body and the spirit; the body is supposed to be organized matter, and the spirit, by many, is thought to be immaterial, without substance. With this latter statement we should beg leave to differ, and state the spirit is a substance; that it is material, but that it is more pure, elastic and refined matter than the body; that it existed before the body, can exist in the body; and will exist separate from the body, when the body will be mouldering in the dust: and will in the resurrection be again united with it. (*TPJS*, 207)

Consistently, then, in rabbinic eschatology “the future life takes the form of resurrection of the dead, rather than the eternal life of the soul.”¹¹⁷

Even in first-century Alexandria, where Hellenistic ideas were already firmly entrenched, Jewish incorporealism was a minority position. For example, Harry Austryn Wolfson, author of the standard biography of Philo, tells us that in his writings Philo often opposed a traditional school of Alexandrian Judaism, which interpreted the scriptures literally. In Wolfson’s words, these traditionalists “display a self-confidence and self-contentment which flow from . . . a faith in the loyalty of their adherents among the great masses of Alexandrian Jews.”¹¹⁸ Later, he adds:

The great mass of believers who will have not felt the impact of the foreign philosophy will see no need of any reconciliation between them. This great mass of believers will either remain indifferent to the innovations of the philosophic reconcilers, or will superciliously look upon them as mere triflers, or, if given provocation, will militantly oppose them as disturbers of the religious peace.¹¹⁹

In the end, Wolfson admits that despite Philo’s effort to synthesize Jewish belief and Greek thought, “Alexandrian Judaism at the time of Philo was of the same stock as Pharisaic Judaism, which flourished in Palestine at that time.”¹²⁰ Thus apparently in the first century the Jews in Alexandria, as well as in Palestine, almost universally believed in an embodied God.¹²¹ And, as Kelly has reminded us, first-century Jewish thought was the mold in which primitive Christian theology took shape.

Though data pertaining to Christian belief during the earliest period of Christian history is meager, that data strongly supports the thesis that the earliest Christians generally believed God to be

¹¹⁷Gottstein, “Body as Image of God,” 177.

¹¹⁸Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), 1:64.

¹¹⁹Wolfson, *Philo*, 1:72.

¹²⁰Wolfson, *Philo*, 1:56.

¹²¹It is interesting that Wolfson asserts “[t]he Jewish God indeed is incorporeal and free from emotions as is the God of the philosophers,” despite his implication that “the great masses of Alexandrian Jews” believed otherwise. Wolfson, *Philo*, 1:26.

embodied. Thus Joseph's claim that his doctrine of divine embodiment was a restoration of primitive Christian understanding seems well corroborated.

Second and Third Century Belief in an Embodied God

Immaterialism was introduced into Christian theology at least as early as the mid-to-late second century, with Clement of Alexandria (about A.D. 150–213) being perhaps the first to unequivocally refer to God as immaterial.¹²² Immaterialists ultimately triumphed, but not without a three-century-long struggle with Christians who held tenaciously to the primitive doctrine of divine embodiment.

Origen as Witness. The writings of Origen (about A.D. 185–253) provide substantial evidence that Christians in the second and third centuries continued to widely believe in God's embodiment—despite the efforts of Platonists both within and without the church to persuade them otherwise. Origen, himself a Christian Platonist, was one of the most influential thinkers of the early Church, second perhaps only to Augustine. Like Philo, he was born and enculturated in Alexandria, on the Mediterranean coast of Egypt. The city was founded in 331 B.C. by Alexander the Great, and up through Origen's time it continued to be a center of Hellenistic intellectual culture.

The first of nine children of Christian parents, Origen received first a literary education, which consisted of studying the Greek classics. He later studied philosophy under the renowned middle-Platonist Ammonius Saccas, who later taught Plotinus, the thinker usually credited with founding Neoplatonism. Origen also knew and respected the works of a number of second-century non-Christian middle-Platonists, including Numenius, whose most important contribution to the tradition was his Platonic doctrine of God. Numenius taught that a first God exists who is ineffable, incorporeal, unmoved, and utterly separated from sensible reality. This first God, through the mediation of a second God, communicates eternal order to the sensible world.

¹²²See Casey, "Clement of Alexandria," 79. For a brief summary of Clement of Alexandria's immaterialistic views on God, see Robert M. Grant, *Gods and the One God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 90–91.

Origen found Numenius' doctrine of God helpful in his attempts to describe the Father and his relationship both to his son Jesus and to the created world. Origen adopted the Platonistic metaphysics of his culture. He then devoted his life to the exegesis of biblical texts in an effort to construct and clarify Christian doctrine to fit his incorporealistic concept of God.¹²³ His devotion to this task gives great significance to his reluctant admissions, explicit and tacit, that his Christian contemporaries widely believed in an embodied God. In at least six ways, Origen's writings support the thesis that his contemporaries believed in a corporeal God.

1. In his most important theological work, *De Principiis* (On First Principles), Origen enumerated the doctrines that he claims were delivered to the Church by the Apostles. Significantly, he did not include the doctrine of divine incorporeality on the list.¹²⁴

2. Origen explicitly acknowledged that when he wrote (around the middle of the third century A.D.), the issue of divine embodiment had yet to be settled in the Church: "How God himself is to be understood,—whether as corporeal, and formed according to some shape, or of a different nature from bodies"—is "a point which is not clearly indicated in our teachings." He thus proposed to make the issue a matter of rational and scriptural investigation with a view to formulating a coherent body of doctrine "by means of illustrations and arguments,—either those . . . discovered in holy Scripture, or . . . deduced by closely tracing out the consequences and following a correct method."¹²⁵

3. Origen discussed certain first- and second-century word usages, ignorance of which had contributed to misunderstanding of some biblical and other early texts. For example, he pointed out

¹²³According to a recent biographer, Joseph Wilson Trigg, Origen did "more than anyone else to relate the Bible to Greek philosophy." Joseph Wilson Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983), 3. For a clear presentation of Origen's Platonism and its formative influences, see chapter 3 (52-75). See also Richard A. Norris, *God and World in Early Christian Theology* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1966), 106-29; and Grant, *Gods and the One God*, 91-92.

¹²⁴Origen, *De Principiis*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1951), 4:239-41 (hereafter cited as *ANF*).

¹²⁵Origen, *De Principiis*, in *ANF*, 4:241.



Pancreator (Christ the Almighty). Mosaic, ca. 1100 A.D. Daphnē, Greece. Courtesy Foto Marburg/Art Resource, N.Y.

This piece represents the Oriental (Near Eastern) tradition in early Christian art, which became the primary tradition in Christian art. The Oriental sage model for Christ invariably portrays him with long hair and a long beard. That is why the standard depiction of Christ usually includes these elements.

A common denominator between the Oriental and Greco-Roman traditions was Neoplatonism, which substituted nonmaterialism for the original Christian theology. Artistically, this theological shift resulted in a conscious movement to eliminate perspective and make images more two dimensional. This objective was accomplished by manipulating three elements. Midrange shadows were eliminated. Mosaic tile was used to simplify the image. And gold tile was used to enhance the reflectivity of the background. When a bright, shining background is used, the background advances, further reducing the perception of three dimensions. The net result is a greatly simplified and flattened image that stylistically eliminates the corporeality of the image.

that nowhere in the Bible is God explicitly described as incorporeal; the Greek term for incorporeal, *asomatos*, does not appear there. Even where that term does appear in early nonscriptural Christian writings, Origen claimed that it does not have the same meaning that Greek and Gentile philosophers assigned to it. Rather, he asserted, Christian writers simply used the term to refer to a material body that is much finer and less palpable than those perceivable through the senses. For example, he explained that in the treatise called *The Doctrine of Peter*, where the resurrected Jesus is quoted as saying to his disciples, “I am not an incorporeal demon,” this statement

must be understood to mean that He had not such a body as demons have, which is naturally fine, and thin as if formed of air (and for this reason is either considered or called by many incorporeal), but that He had a solid and palpable body. Now, according to human custom, everything which is not of that nature is called by the simple or ignorant incorporeal; as if one were to say that the air which we breathe was incorporeal, because it is not a body of such a nature as can be grasped and held, or can offer resistance to pressure.¹²⁶

Among the early Christian writers who described God as *asomatos*, Origen was the first (with the possible exception of Clement of Alexandria) to consistently use the term in its technical Platonist sense. In doing so, Origen followed the lead of second-century non-Christian middle-Platonists such as Albinus.¹²⁷

More unexpectedly, Origen informs us that the New Testament passage “God is a spirit” (John 4:24)—the proof text now most frequently cited in support of the doctrine of incorporeality—was initially understood as evidence against it:

I know that some will attempt to say that, even according to the declarations of our own Scriptures, God is a body, because . . . they find it said . . . in the Gospel according to John, that “God is a Spirit, and they who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.” . . . Spirit, according to them, [is] to be regarded as nothing else than a body.¹²⁸

¹²⁶Origen, *De Principiis*, in *ANF*, 4:241.

¹²⁷See Gedaliahu Stroumsa, “The Incorporeality of God: Context and Implications of Origen’s Position,” *Religion* 13 (1983): 345–58.

¹²⁸Origen, *De Principiis*, in *ANF*, 4:242. For an instance of this, see point 1 of the section on Tertullian as witness. Wolfson admits that “in Scripture . . . there is no indication that by spirit and soul were meant any such principles as form or immateriality.” Wolfson, *Philo*, 2:95.

This surprising statement is easily explained: (1) *pneuma* (translated “spirit”) literally meant air or breath—thus implying that spirit is composed of a material substance, one of the four basic elements, and (2) since Christian Stoics believed that existence was confined to material bodies, God (being spirit) was only the purest of all bodies.¹²⁹

4. Origen engaged in sustained polemics against those who affirmed God’s humanlike embodiment. His argument has two parts. First, he tried to show that corporeality is logically incompatible with philosophical (Platonist) conceptions of the divine nature. Second, by means of painstaking exegesis and allegorical interpretation, he labored to convince his fellow Christians that the scriptures, notwithstanding their literal import, do not disprove divine incorporeality. It is instructive to consider some instances of the latter argument because they indicate the popular Christian understanding of the scriptures that Origen inveighed against.¹³⁰

Origen argued that if scriptural passages that describe God as spirit, light, fire, and so forth were literally understood, they would erroneously suggest that God is corporeal. Consequently, he advocated a metaphorical interpretation.¹³¹ For example, Origen argued that Genesis 1:26, properly interpreted, does not show God to be corporeal:

We do not understand, however, this man indeed whom Scripture says was made “according to the image of God” to be corporeal. For the form of the body does not contain the image of God, nor is the corporeal man said to be “made,” but “formed,” as is written in the words that follow. For the text says: “And God formed man,” that is fashioned, “from the slime of the earth.”

But it is our inner man, invisible, incorporeal, incorruptible, and immortal which is made “according to the image of God.” For it is in such qualities as these that the image of God is more correctly understood. But if anyone suppose that this man who is made “according to the image and likeness of God” is made of flesh, he will

¹²⁹See Stroumsa, “Incorporeality of God,” 345–47. See also Jantzen, “Theological Tradition and Divine Incorporeality,” 22–23.

¹³⁰For an excellent analysis of the centrality of the doctrine of divine incorporeality to Origen’s theology and his sustained polemics against anthropomorphic conceptions of God, see Stroumsa, “Incorporeality of God,” 345–58. “Although Origen does not explicitly name his opponents here, they are, obviously, Christians” (346).

¹³¹Origen, *De Principiis*, in *ANF*, 4:242–45.

appear to represent God himself as made of flesh and in human form. It is most clearly impious to think this about God.¹³²

Origen also made light of an anthropomorphic interpretation of Genesis 1:26 by showing the absurdity that results from interpreting other passages the same way:

In brief, those carnal men who have no understanding of the meaning of divinity suppose, if they read anywhere in the Scriptures of God that "heaven is my throne, and the earth my footstool," that God has so large a body that they think he sits in heaven and stretches out his feet to the earth.¹³³

Origen acknowledged that "the Jews indeed, but also some of our people supposed that God should be understood as a man, that is, adorned with human members and human appearance," because in many scriptural passages God is described as speaking to men. But since, as Origen maintained, "the philosophers despise these stories as fabulous and formed in the likeness of poetic fictions," he attempted to show how God can speak to men without the physical ability to perform the function of speaking:

But in this manner God is said to have spoken to man: he either inspires the heart of each of the saints or causes the sound of a voice to reach his ears. So also when he makes known that what each one says or does is known to him the Scriptures says that he "has heard"; and when he makes known that we have done something unjust, it says that he "is angry"; when he censures us as ungrateful for his benefits, it says he "repents," making known indeed these things by these dispositions which are common to men, but not performing them by these members which belong to corporeal nature.¹³⁴

Origen suggested that just as a human voice can be understood because the tongue repels the air, so the voice of God might be understood as air being reverberated by the will of God. However, God often communicates his word to prophets without the sound of a voice. In this case, the mind of the prophet, which has been illuminated by the Spirit, is directed to words.

¹³²Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1981), 63-64.

¹³³Origen, *Homilies*, 63. As a matter of fact, some believers of this period did conceive of God as having a body of such cosmic proportions. Stroumsa, "Forms of God," 269-88.

¹³⁴Origen, *Homilies*, 90-91.

Origen's criticism of his fellow-Christians' belief in divine embodiment was no doubt connected with his Platonistic low estimation of matter and the body. He considered it "most clearly impious" to "represent God himself as made of flesh and in human form."¹³⁵ His choice, as a young man, to castrate himself testified of his contempt for the body, although it seems he later judged this action rash.¹³⁶ Origen believed that the body was a humiliation—a punishment for the fall from the presence of God. Nonetheless, it served as a means of training whereby we may return to God's presence.¹³⁷ Thus, in Origen's view, the body had an instrumental value, but the spiritual life after the body's death was much to be preferred:

I think that they love God with all their soul who with a great desire to be in union with God withdraw and separate their soul not only from the earthly body but also from everything material. Such men accept the putting away of the body of humiliation without distress or emotion when the time come[s] for them to put off the body of death by what is commonly regarded as death.¹³⁸

Since Origen saw even human embodiment as a humiliation, he vigorously contested divine embodiment.

5. Origen specifically included Melito as among the prominent second-century Christians who taught that God is embodied. Not much is known about Melito's life. Neither his date or place of birth nor his date of death are known, although he was probably dead by A.D. 197. He was active during the imperial reigns of Antoninus Pius (A.D. 138–161) and Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 161–180). Though he apparently spent some of his earlier life in Syria, he was made bishop of Sardis in Lydia in about 168 or 169. As bishop, he was polemically engaged as a Quartodeciman in the controversy concerning Easter.¹³⁹ The only complete text that remains from Melito, *Peri Pascha*, deals with Easter.

¹³⁵Origen, *Homilies*, 63.

¹³⁶Trigg, *Origen*, 53–54.

¹³⁷Trigg, *Origen*, 106.

¹³⁸Origen, "Exhortation to Martyrdom," in *Alexandrian Christianity*, trans. John Oulton and Henry Chadwick (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 394.

¹³⁹Richard C. White, *Melito of Sardis: Sermon "On the Passover"* (Lexington, Ky.: Lexington Theological Seminary Library, 1976), 4–6. A Quartodeciman is "one of a group in the early church esp. in Asia Minor who during the 2d century and until the Nicene Council in 325 observed Easter on the 14th of Nisan when the Jews slaughtered the Passover lamb no matter on what day of the week that date occurred." *Webster's New International Dictionary*, 3d ed., s.v. "quartodeciman."

Melito was a prolific writer, authoring some eighteen to twenty works. Of these, only five or six are definitely known to us, and these are mostly in fragments.¹⁴⁰ The extant fragments provide no affirmation of divine corporeality. However, Origen's testimony, recorded about fifty years after Melito's death, explicitly identified Melito as among the Christians who taught that God has a human-like body.¹⁴¹

Some have suggested that Origen was mistaken in attributing a corporealist view to Melito. They claim that Origen had no basis for this attribution other than a very weak inference from the title of a treatise, *On the Corporeality of God*,¹⁴² which Eusebius included in his enumeration of Melito's works. The title of this work could also be translated as *On God Incarnate*. Thus one commentator, while admitting that "it is not at all impossible that a writer as orthodox as Melito . . . held the opinions which Origen imputes to him," nonetheless questions Origen's claim:

Here occurs the doubt: Had Origen himself read the treatise of Melito, or did he know nothing but the title, and rashly jump to the conclusion that Melito held views akin to those which he was at the moment combating? If Melito be the author of the Syriac apology no fault can be found with the spirituality of his conceptions of God.

¹⁴⁰Stuart George Hall, ed., *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha and Fragments* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979).

¹⁴¹*Et Dixit Deus: Faciamus hominem ad imaginem nostram et similitudinem. Prius discutiendum est ubi consistat illud, ad imaginem, in corpore, an in anima. Et in primis videamus, quibus utantur qui prius asserunt; e quorum numero est Melito, qui scripta reliquit, quibus asserit Deum corporeum esse* ["And God said, 'Let us make man in our image and likeness.' We must determine beforehand where the 'image' resides, whether in the body or in the soul. And let us first see what evidences the first writers on the subject used; among these was Melito, who has left treatises asserting the corporeality of God." Daniel W. Graham, trans., Department of Philosophy, Brigham Young University]. Origen, *Selections on Genesis*, in J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Graeca*, 161 vols. (Paris: Migne, 1857-), 12:94. See also Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, 14:870-71, where he continues his polemics against Christian anthropomorphites: *qui in Ecclesia positi imaginem corpoream hominis Dei esse imaginem dicunt* ["those members of the Church who say that the corporeal form of man is the image of God." Henry Chadwick, trans., *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: University Press, 1965), 416 n. 3].

¹⁴²See Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History and the Martyrs of Palestine*, trans. Hugh Lawlor and John Leonard, 2 vols. (London: SPCK, 1954), 1:132.

It does not seem possible now absolutely to determine the question. We are ourselves inclined to believe that Origen made a mistake, and that the subject of Melito's treatise was the Incarnation.¹⁴³

Such speculation appears unwarranted. Given Origen's vigorous efforts to persuade his fellow Christians to give up their corporealism, it seems totally incongruous that he, without having read Melito's book and without any further evidence, would have attributed this view to a respected bishop of the Church. Moreover, Origen's testimony is further corroborated by Gennadius who, writing in about A.D. 425, affirmed that Melito was responsible for a sect of Christians who followed him in the belief that the body of man is made in the image of God.¹⁴⁴ Further, since the doctrine of divine incorporeality eventually became entrenched as Christian orthodoxy, the fact that Melito taught God's corporeality could help to explain the otherwise mysterious disappearance of this work and other writings.¹⁴⁵

6. Finally, it was Origen who has preserved the testimony of Celsus, a second-century middle-Platonist and non-Christian. Celsus wrote a comprehensive critique of Christianity (about A.D. 178) entitled *Alethes Logos* (True Doctrine), which was later suppressed or destroyed. It is known only through quotations in Origen's work, *Contra Celsum*, composed seventy years later. Celsus attempted to demonstrate the inadequacy of Christian doctrine, especially the doctrine of God, on the basis of assumptions drawn from Platonist philosophical theology.¹⁴⁶

According to Origen, Celsus argued "at length" against what he understood to be the Christian belief that God "is corporeal by nature and has a body like the human form." In his discussion of Celsus—

¹⁴³*A Dictionary of Christian Biography*, 1882, s.v. "Melito."

¹⁴⁴Gennadius, *Liber ecclesiasticorum dogmatum*, 4.

¹⁴⁵Stroumsa claims that the affirmation of Melito's anthropomorphism is unfounded, citing Othmar Perler, trans. and ed., *Méilton: Sur la pâque* (Paris: Cerf, 1966), 13 n. 1. Quoted in Stroumsa, "Form(s) of God," 270.

¹⁴⁶See the introduction to Henry Chadwick, trans., *Origen: Contra Celsum*, 9–32. For an attempted reconstruction of Celsus's work from the quotations in Origen's *Contra Celsum*, see Celsus, *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse against the Christians*, trans. R. Joseph Hoffmann (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). Though by his own admission, Origen has omitted Celsus's sustained anti-corporeality arguments, Hoffmann claims to have reconstructed several pages of these arguments (103–15).

wishing to give to the idea of divine corporeality as little credibility as possible—Origen did not spell out Celsus’s sustained anticorporeality arguments, explaining that if Celsus

invents out of his own head ideas which he heard from nobody, or, to grant that he heard them from somebody, notions which he derived from some simple and naïve folk who do not know the meaning of the Bible, there is no need for us to concern ourselves with unnecessary argument.¹⁴⁷

Interestingly, in responding to Celsus—a fellow Platonist whose objections to divine corporeality he shared—Origen feigned ignorance of any Christians actually teaching the doctrine. But as already shown above, Origen elsewhere reckoned the learned bishop

¹⁴⁷Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum*, 416. This passage continues: “The Bible clearly says that God is incorporeal. That is why ‘no man has seen God at any time’ [John 1:18], and ‘the firstborn of all creation’ is said to be an ‘image of the invisible God’ [Col. 1:15]—using ‘invisible’ in the sense of ‘incorporeal’” (416). Colossians 1:15 is one of four places where Paul uses the Greek word *aoratos*, which is usually translated “invisible.”

However, Origen’s claim that Paul meant *incorporeal* here when he wrote *invisible* is dubious. In their translation of and commentary on Colossians, Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke suggest that Origen’s interpretation is not the proper way to understand *aoratos*.

Aoratos is usually translated as “invisible.” But the verbal adjective in the biblical Greek not only designates a possibility or impossibility, but is also used in a factual and pragmatic sense: the *agnostos theos* in Acts 17:23 is the “unknown God,” not the “unrecognizable” one; as also the *aniptoi cheires* (Matt 15:20) are the “unwashed hands,” not the “unwashable” ones.

It is recommendable in Col 1:15 to translate *aoratos* in this pragmatic sense. This corresponds to the OT usage because there is no Hebrew equivalent of *aoratos* with the meaning of “invisible.” According to the proclamation of the OT, God is not invisible; it is simply not within the capacity of human beings to see Yahweh. . . . It is unlikely that Paul fostered different notions and cannot be demonstrated. In 1 Cor 13:12, he speaks of a “time” when we will no longer look as though through a mirror, but rather “from face to face.” Obviously, he does not presuppose an “invisible God.” (*Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, trans. Astrid B. Beck [New York: Doubleday, 1994], 195–96)

Paul was then suggesting not that God is unseeable, only that he is unseen. Whether humans can see or have seen God is a separate issue because even if no man had ever seen God the Father, this fact in no way entails that God is incorporeal.

Melito among the Christian teachers of the doctrine, and throughout his writings he engaged in sustained polemics against his fellow Christians who believed the doctrine. Thus, it seems clear from the evidence in Origen's own writings that Celsus was neither misinformed nor did he misrepresent second-century Christians' belief that God is embodied. From Origen's testimony, it is clear that this belief continued to be widely held in the third century as well.

Tertullian as Witness. Origen's implication that contemporary Christians who believed God to be embodied were confined to simple and naïve folk is contradicted by one of the most cultured of all his Christian contemporaries—Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus (about A.D. 150–220). Tertullian stoutly maintained his belief that God is embodied and passionately resisted attempts by immaterialists to platonize Christian doctrine. Tertullian not only believed in an embodied God, but he wrote profusely on this and related doctrines. Moreover, he claimed to express the views of the churches of his day, which were derived from the original apostolic churches. He articulated in rich detail a unified corporeal understanding of Christianity.

Tertullian was a lawyer who converted to Christianity in about 197.¹⁴⁸ According to Jerome, Tertullian became an ordained priest. He was born in Carthage and apparently spent most of his life there, though he had more than a passing acquaintance with Rome. Tertullian was well educated in literature as well as law;¹⁴⁹ his writings show an impressive familiarity with the philosophical and literary classics of his time. He was a genius with language and wrote prolifically and fluently in both Greek and Latin.¹⁵⁰ Many have considered him the father of ecclesiastical Latin—though this claim is disputed.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸See Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 57–58.

¹⁴⁹Robert E. Roberts, *The Theology of Tertullian* (London: Epworth, 1924), 26–32.

¹⁵⁰Though the period of time during which Tertullian wrote was relatively short (ca. 197–218), thirty-one of his works are extant, and at least a dozen others were written but did not survive. Barnes, *Tertullian*, 30–41.

¹⁵¹For support of this claim, see James Morgan, *The Importance of Tertullian in the Development of Christian Dogma* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1928), 77–97; and *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Tertullian." For an opposing position, see Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, 4 vols. (Westminster: Newman, 1980), 2:249–59.

As far as is known, Tertullian was the first to coin the Latin *trinitas*.¹⁵² His genius with language allowed him to craft brilliant polemical theological treatises, which contributed profoundly to the clarification of Christian doctrine on topics such as the Incarnation, the Trinity, and the Sacraments.¹⁵³

Tertullian was active in a Christian movement known at the time as the New Prophecy.¹⁵⁴ This movement attempted to recover the prophetic revelation and spiritual gifts characteristic of the apostolic age, to preserve pristine Christian doctrine against philosophical intrusions, and to prepare a people for Christ's second coming, which was believed to be imminent. The movement apparently began about A.D. 170 in Mysia, a remote village in Phrygia, when a man named Montanus began to prophesy, claiming revelation through the Paraclete (or Holy Ghost). Soon after, he was joined by two prophetesses, Prisca (or Priscilla) and Maximilla:

All three spoke as the mouthpieces of God himself: their possession was truly divine, not the doing of a mere angel or messenger from heaven. In them God spoke, the Almighty, The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The prophets played a consciously passive role as God's instruments: they were the lyre which the Spirit plucked like a plectrum. Through them God spoke directly to the world, and especially to the humble, in order to give them the courage to die as martyrs. The end of the world was approaching, and the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1 ff.) would descend on Pepuza in Phrygia. In a word, Montanism was a millenarian movement.¹⁵⁵

Despite opposition from some Asian churches who declared Montanus' prophecies "to be inspired by the Devil, excommunicated adherents, and vilified them in slanderous pamphlets,"¹⁵⁶ the movement spread rapidly to Rome, to Alexandria, and even to Gaul.

¹⁵²Morgan, *Importance of Tertullian*, 23.

¹⁵³For a fuller account of Tertullian's significance in relation to contemporary theology, see Morgan, *Importance of Tertullian*, 148-65.

¹⁵⁴Clear signs of Tertullian's involvement appear in his writings starting ca. 206-7. Barnes, *Tertullian*, 46-47. Much later, adherents of the New Prophecy were called Montanists after the name of the movement's founder, Montanus. They were most often called Cataphyrians by their opponents, the title indicating their geographical origin. See Ronald E. Heine, trans. and ed., *The Montanist Oracles and Testimonia* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1989), ix.

¹⁵⁵Barnes, *Tertullian*, 131.

It achieved its greatest success in Carthage, where Tertullian became a partisan, as Timothy Barnes explains:

Since Christianity was a revealed religion, [Tertullian] was unwilling to believe that revelation had ceased in the Apostolic age. Inexorably, therefore, he was led on to espouse the Montanist cause. The issues were simple in his eyes. Recognition of the Paraclete, whom God has promised to send (Jn 14.16), severed him from the 'psychici.' The Paraclete, the 'deductor omnis veritatis' (Jn 16.13), gave necessary counsel to every Christian. Its promptings preserved doctrinal orthodoxy from the assaults of heresy.¹⁵⁷

Tertullian himself sought to preserve original Christian doctrine, as founded on revelation, against the encroachments of Platonistic immaterialism. His understanding of Christianity included at least six points that support divine embodiment. He argued that (1) God, like all that is, is embodied, (2) beings of spirit may take on solid bodily form, (3) Christ in the Incarnation specifically took on flesh that was unqualifiedly human, (4) human flesh is a sacred and glorious substance, (5) the same fleshy body that falls in human death rises in the Resurrection, and (6) Christ's resurrected body is an everlasting and crucial attribute of the Godhead.¹⁵⁸ These complementary points form part of Tertullian's unified explication of his corporeal Christian faith.

1. Tertullian believed that God is and has always been a material body.¹⁵⁹ He also believed that all things that exist are

¹⁵⁶Barnes, *Tertullian*, 131.

¹⁵⁷Barnes, *Tertullian*, 131-32. Although the Montanists were called heretical by later Christians, their differences from their contemporaries were in matters of practice, not theology. Barnes, *Tertullian*, 42. Likewise Tertullian's "orthodoxy in matters of doctrine remained impeccable" during his Montanist years, as before.

¹⁵⁸For a summary of Tertullian's views on God, see Norris, *Early Christian Theology*, 81-105.

¹⁵⁹Tertullian did not use the phrase "material body" to describe God, but simply "body" (Latin *corpore*). In fact, Tertullian used the Latin *materia*, cognate to the English "matter," to refer specifically to the matter of the world in contradistinction to God's eternal substance. Tertullian, *Against Hermogenes*, in *ANF*, 3:477-502. (In addition to referring to the chapter and book [if any] of Tertullian's works, I cite the page number from Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, *ANF*, 3.) He also specifically distinguished God and matter as "two words and two things." Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*, bk. 2, ch. 4, *ANF*, 3:133. Likewise, he said that the human soul

material,¹⁶⁰ though not all material is the rough stuff we interact with in daily life. In an apologetic work addressed to pagans hostile to Christianity, Tertullian expressed approval of Zeno's model, which "separates the matter of world from God . . . [in which] the latter has percolated through the former, like honey through the comb."¹⁶¹ Addressing heretics who taught that the Word was immaterial (A.D. 210),¹⁶² Tertullian defined God's materiality as a more fluid or

is formed "by the breathing of God, and not out of [non-divine] matter," clearly distinguishing God from the matter of the world. Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul*, ch. 3, *ANF*, 3:184. Although Tertullian did not apply the term *material* to God, the properties that he ascribed to God are what we now consider to be the defining properties of matter: spatial location, extension, shape, and "even a certain tangibility." Morgan, *Importance of Tertullian*, 182. Hence I describe Tertullian's conception of the soul and of God as materialistic. It is nevertheless important to remember that Tertullian distinguished between created, perishable, sensible matter and the uncreated, imperishable, insensible substance (matter) of God. Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*, ch. 4, *ANF*, 3:132.

¹⁶⁰Morgan, *Importance of Tertullian*, 15. This notion appears explicitly in Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, ch. 7, *ANF*, 3:187; and implicitly in Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, ch. 7, *ANF*, 3:602. Although Tertullian closely agreed with the Stoics on this and many other beliefs and methods, we should not thereby conclude that Stoicism was the source of his belief. See Morgan, *Importance of Tertullian*, 10–16. While Tertullian employed Stoic explanations, arguments, and beliefs, he exercised discrimination in doing so.

For example, Tertullian used arguments of Stoic and other philosophers to support his belief in the corporeality of the soul, particularly agreeing with the Stoics' description of the soul "almost in our own terms." Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, ch. 5, *ANF*, 3:184–85. Yet elsewhere, Tertullian pointed out that the Stoics do not believe in the restoration of the body, condemned them as the source of Marcion's and Hermogenes' heresies, and denounced broadly the teaching of Zeno as making the matter of the world equal with God. Tertullian, *On Prescription against Heretics*, ch. 7, *ANF*, 3:246; and Tertullian, *Against Hermogenes*, ch. 1, *ANF*, 3:477. On this last point, Tertullian criticized precisely the Stoic materialism that some say was the basis of his own belief. Morgan, *Importance of Tertullian*, 182.

While Tertullian acknowledged that his beliefs sometimes coincided with those of this or that philosopher, he used philosophical authority strictly as a supplement to the ultimate authority of biblical and continuing revelation. He held that "all questions" should be referred "to God's inspired standard." Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, ch. 2, *ANF*, 3:182–83. The discrimination Tertullian showed in regard to philosophical doctrine precludes a simple explaining away of Tertullian's materialism as due to inability to transcend Stoic prejudices (although Morgan suggests this explanation in *Importance of Tertullian*, 16). For further discussion of Tertullian's relationship to pagan philosophy, see R. Braun, "Tertullien et la philosophie païenne. Essai de mise au point," *Bulletin de L'Association Guillaume Budé* 2 (June 1971): 231–51.

¹⁶¹Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*, bk. 2, ch. 4, *ANF*, 3:133.

subtle mode of matter than that which comprises the world. He is also “a body, although ‘God is a Spirit,’” for Spirit “has a bodily substance of its own kind.”¹⁶³

To support his claim that the creator of the material earth must be a body, Tertullian presented an argument reminiscent of modern versions of the so-called mind-body problem.

How could it be, that He Himself is nothing, without whom nothing was made? How would He who is empty have made things which are solid, and He who is void have made things which are full, and He who is incorporeal have made things which have body? For although a thing may sometimes be made different from him by whom it is made, yet nothing can be made by that which is a void and empty thing.¹⁶⁴

This argument attempts to show that the Word, by whom the worlds were made (Heb. 1:2), must be a material body. The same argument applies to the Father, thus supporting Tertullian’s understanding of the Father as Spirit and therefore materially embodied, although in the original text, Tertullian presented the Father’s corporeality as needless of argumentative support; he gave the Father’s corporeality as another reason to believe in the Son’s corporeality.¹⁶⁵

Tertullian’s notion of material Spirit included attributes of location, extension, shape, texture, rarity, and density. In arguing against Hermogenes and others misled by Plato and the Stoics (in A.D. 206),¹⁶⁶ he described how God’s breath, which is a portion of his Spirit,¹⁶⁷ condensed and became Adam’s soul:

After God hath breathed upon the face of man the breath of life, and man had consequently become a living soul, surely that breath must have passed through the face at once into the interior structure, and

¹⁶²To date Tertullian’s writing, I rely on Barnes’s chronology. Barnes, *Tertullian*, 55.

¹⁶³Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, ch. 7, *ANF*, 3:602. This interpretation of John 4:25 was noted by Origen. See point 3 of the section on Origen as witness.

¹⁶⁴Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, ch. 7, *ANF*, 3:602.

¹⁶⁵While some may find this argument persuasive, my point in presenting it is to illustrate Tertullian’s understanding of God, not to suggest that this understanding is demonstrated by this reasoning. Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, ch. 7, *ANF*, 3:602.

¹⁶⁶See Barnes, *Tertullian*, 123.

¹⁶⁷Tertullian cited Isaiah 24:5 as teaching that man’s soul is a condensation of the Spirit or breath of God: “My Spirit went forth from me, and I made the breath of each. And the breath of my Spirit became soul.” Tertullian, *Treatise on*

have spread itself throughout all the spaces of the body; and as soon as by the divine inspiration it had become condensed, it must have impressed itself on each internal feature, which the condensation had filled it, and so have been, as it were, congealed in shape (or stereotyped). Hence, by this densifying process, there arose a fixing of the soul's corporeity; and by the impression its figure was formed and molded. Thus is the inner man, different from the outer, but yet one in the twofold condition. It, too, has eyes and ears of its own.¹⁶⁸

Thus before its impression in the body, the Spirit of God apparently has no *fixed* shape, but it has extension and position so that it can pass through Adam's face and flow through his body before condensing and transforming into soul.

Even in his earliest writings (between A.D. 198 and 203), Tertullian represented the Spirit of God explicitly as "subtly" material, having location and form, although its shape may not be fixed. He described the Spirit of God as corporeal, although not human in form:

The Spirit of God, who since the beginning was borne upon the waters, would as baptizer abide upon waters. A holy thing in fact was carried upon a holy thing—or rather, that which carried acquired holiness from that which was carried upon it. Any matter placed beneath another is bound to take to itself the quality of that which is suspended over it: and especially must corporeal matter take up spiritual quality, which because of the subtlety of the substance it belongs to finds it easy to penetrate and inhere.¹⁶⁹

2. Tertullian thought it nothing strange that a being of subtle spirit should take more solid bodily form. He considered the human spirit to be one of the inseparable faculties of the human

the Soul, ch. 11, *ANF*, 3:191. Hence man's soul was once a part of God. This concept is especially significant because Tertullian expressly asserted elsewhere that the matter out of which God formed the world had a beginning when God created the world out of nothing. Tertullian, *Against Hermogenes*, ch. 33, *ANF*, 3:496. In this book, he contrasted creation out of nothing with creation out of God's own substance. Tertullian, *Against Hermogenes*, ch. 2, *ANF*, 3:477. Hence, Tertullian made the human soul of eternal, uncreated, divine substance in contrast with created and perishable matter.

¹⁶⁸Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, ch. 9, *ANF*, 3:189. Although he says "the face of man," Tertullian clearly alludes to Genesis 2:7 in this passage, which he quotes as referring to Adam. Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, ch. 3, *ANF*, 3:184.

¹⁶⁹Ernest Evans, trans., *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism* (Cambridge, England: University Printing House, 1964), 9, 11. See also a slightly different translation in Tertullian, *On Baptism*, *ANF*, 3:670.

soul,¹⁷⁰ which has the same form as the body of flesh it inhabits. He used reason, religious experience, and biblical revelation to support this belief.

Criticizing Plato, Tertullian argued rationally that the soul must be corporeal in order (1) to sympathize and interact with the body, (2) to move the body, and (3) to be described as departing the body at the time of death.¹⁷¹ Then he reasoned that since the soul is corporeal,

We shall not be at all inconsistent if we declare that the more usual characteristics of a body, such as invariably accrue to the corporeal condition, belong also to the soul—such as form and limitation; and that triad of dimensions. . . . What now remains but for us to give the soul a figure [*effigiem*]?¹⁷²

To his rational argument that a soul must have humanlike form, Tertullian added evidence drawn from the religious experiences of a contemporary Christian woman associated with New Prophecy. She claimed:

There has been shown to me a soul in bodily shape, and a spirit has been in the habit of appearing to me; not, however, a void and empty illusion, but such as would offer itself to be even grasped by the hand, soft and transparent and of an ethereal color, and form resembling that of a human being in every respect.¹⁷³

Finally, he rounded out his case for the humanlike form of the soul by an appeal to biblical authority. For instance, he relied on the New Testament account of Lazarus and the rich man in hell (Luke 16:23–24): “[The soul], too, has eyes and ears of its own . . . [;] it has, moreover all the members of the body. . . . Thus it happens that the rich man in hell has a tongue and poor [Lazarus] a finger and Abraham a bosom.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, ch. 10, ANF, 3:190.

¹⁷¹Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, chs. 5–6, ANF, 3:185.

¹⁷²Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, ch. 9, ANF, 3:188. The word that Tertullian uses for *figure* is cognate with the English *effigy*, which roughly means a copy of something.

¹⁷³Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, ch. 9, ANF, 3:188.

¹⁷⁴Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, ch. 9, ANF, 3:189. In this passage, Tertullian also refers to Paul hearing and seeing the Lord (2 Cor. 12:2–4). For other arguments based on scripture, see Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, ch. 7, ANF, 3:187.

Tertullian believed that angels, though beings of spirit, appear in temporary solid bodies. Furthermore, addressing heretics who claimed Christ's corporeality was illusory (about A.D. 206), Tertullian even attributed to the Holy Spirit the power to take literal bodily form:

The Gospel of John . . . declares that the Spirit descended in the body of a dove, and sat upon the Lord. When the said Spirit was in this condition, He was truly a dove as He was also a spirit; nor did He destroy His own proper substance by the assumption of an extraneous substance. But you ask what becomes of the dove's body, after the return of the Spirit back to heaven, and similarly in the case of the angels. Their withdrawal was effected in the same manner as their appearance had been. . . . Still there was solidity in their bodily substance, whatever may have been the force by which the body became visible.¹⁷⁵

3. Tertullian believed that the Word took on human flesh when he was born as the son of God. He wrote an entire book, *On the Flesh of Christ*, to argue that Christ's flesh was very much human flesh; that the soul, which gave that flesh life, was of the same sort as inhabits other human bodies; and that Christ's humanity was essential to the purpose of his life and work on earth. He affirmed that Christ's was a flesh "suffused with blood, built up with bones, interwoven with nerves, entwined with veins, *a flesh* which knew how to be born, and how to die, human without doubt, as born of a human being." Such a flesh was necessary so that Christ could suffer and die to redeem mankind. While fully divine in spirit, Christ was fully human in body: "The powers of the Spirit, proved Him to be God, His sufferings attested the flesh of man. If His powers were not without the Spirit in like manner, were not His sufferings without the flesh."¹⁷⁶

4. In no way did Tertullian consider it degrading for God to take bodily or even human form. As part of his multifaceted argument that Christ really dwelt in human flesh, Tertullian argued vehemently for the worthiness of human flesh. To those who considered the flesh a shameful thing, Tertullian said of the condition of being clothed in flesh:

And are *you* for turning these conditions into occasions of blushing to the very creature whom He has redeemed, (censuring them), too,

¹⁷⁵Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ*, ch. 3, ANF, 3:523.

¹⁷⁶Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ*, ch. 5, ANF, 3:525; italics in original.

us unworthy of Him who certainly would not have redeemed them had He not loved them? Our birth He reforms from death by a second birth from heaven; our flesh He restores from every harassing malady; when leprous, He cleanses it of the stain; when blind, He rekindles its light; when palsied, He renews its strength; when possessed with devils, He exorcises it; when dead, He reanimates it,—then shall *we* blush to own it?¹⁷⁷

Far from an embarrassment, he considered the body and its process of generation to be sacred, calling it a “reverend discourse of nature.”¹⁷⁸ Elsewhere he reiterated that “nature should be to us an object of reverence, not of blushes.”¹⁷⁹

Tertullian also denied that the flesh is the source of sin:

[The soul] suffuses even the flesh (by reason of their conjunction) with its own shame. Now although the flesh is sinful, . . . yet the flesh has not such ignominy on its own account. For it is not of itself that it thinks anything or feels anything for the purpose of advising or commanding sin. . . . It is only a ministering thing.¹⁸⁰

Thus Tertullian held that the soul is the origin of sinful impulses and that the flesh is sinful only as an abettor in the commission of the sins the soul initiates.¹⁸¹

Far from being a degrading substance, Tertullian maintained that earthly flesh is a glorified substance, since God created it:

You have both the clay made glorious by the hand of God, and the flesh more glorious still by His breathing upon it, by virtue of which the flesh not only laid aside its clayey rudiments, but also took on itself the ornaments of the soul.¹⁸²

He further compared the flesh to splendid gold, which similarly derives from the refining of earth.¹⁸³

5. Tertullian believed that the resurrected rise in a body of flesh. Against those led by philosophy to deny bodily resurrection, Tertullian argues, using Christ as the paradigm (about A.D. 206):

For the very same body which fell in death, and which lay in the sepulchre, did also rise again; (and it was) not so much Christ in

¹⁷⁷Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ*, ch. 4, ANF, 3:524; italics in original.

¹⁷⁸Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ*, ch. 4, ANF, 3:524.

¹⁷⁹Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, ch. 27, ANF, 3:208.

¹⁸⁰Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, ch. 40, ANF, 3:220.

¹⁸¹Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, ch. 40, ANF, 3:220.

¹⁸²Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, ch. 7, ANF, 3:550.

¹⁸³Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, ch. 18, ANF, 3:557–58; and ch. 6, ANF, 3:549.

the flesh, as the flesh in Christ. If, therefore, we are to rise again after the example of Christ, who rose in the flesh, we shall certainly not rise according to that example, unless we also shall ourselves rise again in the flesh.¹⁸⁴

To clarify Paul's teaching regarding the Resurrection—"It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:44)—Tertullian explained the difference between natural and spiritual bodies: "As therefore the flesh was at first an animate (or natural) body on receiving the soul, so at last will it become a spiritual body when invested with the spirit [of God]."¹⁸⁵ Thus Tertullian believed that resurrected flesh is flesh similar to mortal flesh, but the spiritual body of the resurrection is a fleshy body that has been purified by accepting God's Spirit.

In a similar manner, our (fleshy) bodies may become spiritual even in mortality:

First of all there comes the (natural) soul, that is to say, the breath, to the people that are on the earth,—in other words, to those who act carnally in the flesh; then afterwards comes the Spirit to those who walk thereon,—that is, who subdue the works of the flesh; because the apostle also says, that "that is not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural (or in possession of the natural soul), and afterward that which is spiritual."¹⁸⁶

The fact that a person's body can become a spiritual one while it is still mortal further clarifies that the spiritual body is material. Clearly, for Tertullian, the spiritual body of the Resurrection is a body of flesh, purified by the Spirit of God.

6. Tertullian believed that the Word not only took on human flesh when he was born as the son of God, but that he also will retain that flesh forever in its resurrected, glorified state:

He who suffered "will come again from heaven" (Acts 1:2), and by all shall He be seen, who rose again from the dead. They too who crucified Him shall see and acknowledge Him; that is to say, His very flesh, against which they spent their fury, and without which it would be impossible for Himself either to exist or to be seen; so that they must blush with shame who affirm that His flesh sits in heaven void of sensation, like a sheath only, Christ being withdrawn from

¹⁸⁴Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, ch. 48, ANF, 3:581.

¹⁸⁵Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, ch. 53, ANF, 3:587.

¹⁸⁶Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, ch. 11, ANF, 3:191.

it; as well as those who (maintain) that His flesh and soul are just the same thing, or else that His soul is all that exists, but that His flesh no longer lives.¹⁸⁷

Without his body, Christ could not have accomplished his mission on earth, and deprived of it, he would not be Christ. Insofar as Christ and his mission contribute to the glory of the Godhead, so contributes the flesh. Tertullian's belief clearly contrasts with interpretations of the Resurrection that explain away Christ's eternal embodiment.

Tertullian's defense of God as materially embodied, of the Resurrection of the flesh, and of the soul as humanlike in form is part of a larger effort to preserve what he understood to be pristine Christian doctrine and to defend it against attempts by late second-century and early third-century Christian Platonists to recast it within an immaterialistic, metaphysical framework.¹⁸⁸ Since Christianity is a revealed religion, Tertullian insisted that discussants must refer "all questions to God's inspired standard." This standard included the Old Testament, the words of the Apostles, and the tradition of the churches that the Apostles established. Tertullian cited all three in support of his doctrines.

While combating heresy, Tertullian maintained that the apostolic tradition had been well preserved. The "many" and "great" Christian churches that continue in "one and the same faith" evidence that the tradition is strong.¹⁸⁹ Moreover, his own doctrine "has its origins in the tradition of the apostles" and the churches they organized, being "in no respect different *from theirs*."¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ*, ch. 24, ANF, 3:542.

¹⁸⁸See Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, ch. 23, ANF, 3:203. For a fuller discussion of Tertullian's resistance to Platonism, see Roberts, *Theology of Tertullian*, 63-78.

¹⁸⁹Tertullian, *On Prescription against Heretics*, ch. 28, ANF, 3:256.

¹⁹⁰Tertullian, *On Prescription against Heretics*, ch. 21, ANF, 3:252-53; italics in original. Although this work stands on its own as a general statement on heresy and orthodoxy, it also serves as a preface to a series of Tertullian's works addressed to particular heresies, including *A Treatise on the Soul*, *Against Praxeas*, *On the Flesh of Christ*, *On the Resurrection of the Dead*, *Against Hermogenes*, and *Against Marcion*. Note also the many places where Tertullian refers to his appeal to apostolic authority as a criterion for distinguishing orthodox Christian doctrines: *On Prescription against Heretics*, chs. 31, 34, ANF, 3:259-60; *Against Marcion*, bk. 5, ch. 1, ANF, 3:429; and *Against Hermogenes*, ch. 1, ANF, 3:477.

Tertullian thus implied that from the beginnings of Christianity to his day, there had been a unified body of Christians who, faithful to the apostolic tradition, affirmed that God is embodied.¹⁹¹

As an educated Christian, Tertullian was in a position to resist philosophical intrusions into Christian doctrine in a way that unlearned Christians could not. After his conversion, Tertullian devoted all of his efforts to the defense of Christianity.¹⁹² Tertullian asserted that philosophy is the parent of heresy and posed the trenchant questions that have continued to haunt classical Christian theologians through the centuries:

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? what between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from "the porch of Solomon," who had himself taught that "the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart." Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition!¹⁹³

Fourth and Fifth Century Belief in an Embodied God

Tertullian's vigorous attempt to preserve within Christianity the understanding that God is embodied was, of course, ultimately to fail. But the triumph of immaterialism came about only gradually. Indeed, significant pockets of Christians, resisting Hellenistic influences, continued to believe in an embodied deity as late as the fourth and fifth centuries. That this is so is evident in the writings of Augustine (A.D. 354–430), an uncompromising advocate of incorporealism.

Augustine was born at Thagaste in North Africa in 354. His mother, Monica, was a Christian. During his youth and early adulthood, Augustine apparently understood that Christians believed

¹⁹¹Tertullian, *On Prescription against Heretics*, chs. 20, 28, *ANF*, 3:252, 256. See also numerous instances where Tertullian speaks as "we" and of his doctrines as those of "ourselves," as in Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, ch. 2, *ANF*, 3:182.

¹⁹²As a new convert, Tertullian devoted himself to the obvious threats to Christianity outside the Christian community. His earliest writings defended Christianity against pagans and Jews. However, as he became more deeply involved in the issues threatening Christianity, Tertullian turned to internal threats, which he saw as the most significant dangers.

¹⁹³Tertullian, *On Prescription against Heretics*, ch. 7, *ANF*, 3:246.

God to be embodied; by his own admission, it was this very doctrine that for many years constituted an insurmountable stumbling block to his acceptance of the Christian faith. He said that as a youth, he was much embarrassed by the doctrine and thus succumbed to the logic of those who maligned it:

My own specious reasoning induced me to give in to the sly arguments of fools who asked me . . . whether God was confined to the limits of a bodily shape, whether he had hair and nails. . . . My ignorance was so great that these questions troubled me, and while I thought I was approaching the truth, I was only departing the further from it. . . . How could I see this when with the sight of my eyes I saw no more than material things and with the sight of my mind no more than their images? I did not know that God is a spirit, a being without bulk and without limbs defined in length and breadth. . . . Nor had I the least notion . . . what the Scriptures mean when they say that we are made in God's image.¹⁹⁴

At first unable to accept Christianity because of its doctrine that God is embodied in humanlike form, Augustine was much attracted to the Manichaean sect, which endorsed a nonanthropomorphic, though still material, deity.

I had lost hope of being able to find the truth in your Church, O Lord. . . . The Manichees had turned me away from it: at the same time I thought it outrageous to believe that you had the shape of a human body and were limited within the dimensions of limbs like our own. . . . For when I tried to fall back upon the Catholic faith, my mind recoiled because the Catholic faith was not what I supposed it to be . . . but, O my God . . . I thought that this was a more pious belief than to suppose that you were limited, in each and every way, by the outlines of a human body.¹⁹⁵

Eventually, Augustine's career as a teacher of rhetoric took him from his native Africa to Italy, first to Rome and then to Milan. There, under the influence of Bishop Ambrose, he became acquainted with Latin translations of Platonist writings and with the possibility of God's being a "purely *spiritual* being" in the sense of being totally immaterial, invisible, and incorporeal.¹⁹⁶ This view of God dissolved his long-standing aversion to Christian

¹⁹⁴Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1961), bk. 3, sec. 7, pp. 62-63.

¹⁹⁵Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. 5, sec. 10, pp. 104-5.

¹⁹⁶Stroumsa, "Incorporeality of God," 352.

doctrine and was a major factor in his conversion in 386. The following year, at age thirty-two, he was finally baptized a Christian. In his newly found Platonic understanding of God, he exulted:

I learned that your spiritual children . . . do not understand the words *God made man in his own image* to mean that you are limited by the shape of a human body, . . . nevertheless I was glad at this time I had been howling my complaints not against the Catholic faith. . . .

O God, you who are so high above us and yet so close, hidden and yet always present, you have not parts, some greater and some smaller. You are everywhere and everywhere you are entire. Nowhere are you limited by space. You have not the shape of a body like ours. . . .

Your Catholic Church . . . I had learnt [*sic*] . . . did not teach the doctrines which I so sternly denounced. This bewildered me, but I was on the road to conversion and I was glad. . . . [I] had no liking for childish absurdities and there was nothing in the sound doctrine which she taught to show that you, the Creator of all things, were confined within a measure of space which, however high, however wide it might be, was yet strictly determined by the form of a human body.¹⁹⁷

From these passages, it is evident that in his youth and probably until his early thirties, Augustine understood Christians to believe that God is embodied.

In two ways, Kim Paffenroth has recently challenged this reading of the quoted texts. He claims that young Augustine's references to Christian belief in an embodied deity are either merely allusions to the Incarnation or misunderstandings caused by Manichaeans who, intent on discrediting Christian beliefs, misrepresented them.¹⁹⁸ However, the fact that young Augustine understood that Christians believed that God was embodied, and not merely as the incarnate Son, seems beyond dispute, for according to Augustine's own account, the scriptural warrant for Christian belief in divine embodiment was largely found in the Old Testament and, hence, was not merely based upon the Incarnation. For instance, he disclosed that it was only after he met Ambrose in Milan that he learned that God's "spiritual children . . . do not understand the words *God made man in his*

¹⁹⁷Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. 6, secs. 3-4, pp. 114-15; italics in original.

¹⁹⁸Kim Paffenroth, "Paulsen on Augustine: An Incorporeal or Nonanthropomorphic God?" *Harvard Theological Review* 86 (1993): 233-35.

own image to mean that [God] is limited by the shape of a human body.”¹⁹⁹

Moreover, that Augustine, as a result of Manichaean misrepresentations, for many years just misunderstood what Christians of his acquaintance believed seems incredible. How could he be so radically mistaken when his own mother was a Christian, when he grew up among Christians, and when he even studied Christian catechism? But quite apart from inference, Augustine provided considerable evidence of Christian belief in an embodied deity.

Augustine discussed “the carnal and weak *of our faith*, who, when they hear the members of the body used figuratively, as, when God’s eyes or ears are spoken of, are accustomed, in the license of fancy, to picture God to themselves in a human form.” Though Augustine found these Christians’ belief that God has “a human form which is the most excellent of its kind” laughable, he nonetheless found it more “allowable” and “respectable” than the Manichaean alternative. Moreover, unlike the Manichaeans, Augustine said that these “carnal” Christians are teachable and, with proper instruction in the Church, may gradually come “to understand spiritually the figures and parables of the Scriptures.”²⁰⁰

Further, Augustine provided a catalogue of heretical Christian communities or sects.²⁰¹ He identified two Christian communities, contemporary with himself, who explicitly taught that God is embodied in humanlike form. Members of the first community were called Audiani (sometimes Vadiani). They were followers of a Christian deacon, Audius of Edessa, and were located primarily in Syria and Mesopotamia. Members of the second community were called the Anthropomorphites and were located in Egypt. John Cassian, a Christian monk who spent about fifteen years (about A.D. 385–400) in the Egyptian monastic communities, corroborated

¹⁹⁹Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. 6, sec. 3, pp. 114; italics in original.

²⁰⁰Augustine, *The Writings against the Manichaens and against the Donatists*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1956), ch. 23, sec. 25, p. 139; italics added.

²⁰¹See Liguori G. Müller, *The De Haeresibus of Saint Augustine* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1956). Müller says, “It becomes evident immediately in the *De Haeresibus* that Augustine envisioned a heresy as a concrete sect, not a heretical proposition, since he speaks of the individual members of the sect rather than of the tenets they hold” (50).

Augustine's testimony with respect to Egyptian anthropomorphism. Although Cassian was an Origenist and an incorporealist, he nonetheless made it clear that for late fourth-century Christian monks in Egypt, anthropomorphism was the long-established norm and incorporealism was the innovation.²⁰²

Cassian records that Theophilus, Bishop of Alexandria, sent a letter in 399 to the Egyptian churches to set the dates of Lent and Easter. In that letter, Theophilus included a condemnation of anthropomorphism, which

was received very bitterly by almost every sort of monk throughout all Egypt. . . . Indeed, the majority of the older men among the brethren asserted that in fact the bishop was to be condemned as someone corrupted by the most serious heresy, someone opposing the ideas of holy Scripture, someone who denied that almighty God was of human shape—and this despite the clear scriptural evidence that Adam was created in His image.²⁰³

Even the monks in Scete, “who were far ahead of all the Egyptian monks in perfection and knowledge,”²⁰⁴ and all the priests except Paphnutius—an Origenist in charge of Cassian's church—denounced the bishop's letter. Those in charge of the three other churches in the desert refused to allow the letter to be read or publicly presented at their assemblies.

Cassian chronicled the particular struggles of one monk, Serapion, in accepting the view that God is not embodied. According to Cassian, Serapion had long lived a life of austerity and monastic discipline that, coupled with his age, had brought him into the front ranks of the monks. Despite the persistent efforts of Paphnutis to dissuade him, Serapion had held fast to his belief that God is embodied.

The concept [of a nonembodied God] seemed new-fangled to him. It was something unknown to his predecessors and not taught by them.

²⁰²Otto Meinardus concludes that “anthropomorphists appear to have outnumbered the liberal party [the Origenists who preferred allegorical interpretations of the Scriptures] by at least three to one.” *Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts*, rev. ed. (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1989), 53.

²⁰³Colm Luibheid, trans., *John Cassian: Conferences* (New York: Paulist, 1985), 125–26.

²⁰⁴Luibheid, *Cassian: Conferences*, 26.

By chance a deacon named Photinus came along. He was a very well-versed man. . . . [I]n order to add strength to the doctrine contained in the bishop's letter he brought Photinus into a gathering of all the brethren. He asked him how the Catholic churches of the East interpreted the words in Genesis, "Let us make man in our own image and likeness" (Gn. 1.26).

Photinus explained how all the leaders of the churches were unanimous in teaching that the image and likeness of God should be understood not in an earthly, literal sense but spiritually. He himself demonstrated the truth of this in a lengthy discourse and with abundant scriptural evidence. . . .

At last the old man was moved by the many very powerful arguments of this extremely learned man. . . . We stood up to bless the Lord and to pour out our prayers of thanks to Him. And then amid these prayers the old man became confused, for he sensed that the human image of God which he used to draw before him as he prayed was now gone from his heart. Suddenly he gave way to the bitterest, most abundant tears and sobs. He threw himself on the ground and . . . cried out: "Ah the misfortune! They've taken my God away from me. I have no one to hold on to, and I don't know whom to adore or to address."²⁰⁵

According to Owen Chadwick, Cassian's description of Sarpion's capitulation greatly understated the resoluteness of Egyptian resistance to Theophilus's decree proscribing anthropomorphism. Chadwick writes:

Were Cassian the sole authority, the impression would be left that, despite the fierce opposition of great numbers, the decrees of Theophilus were ultimately accepted by the Egyptians. We hear nothing in Cassian of the riots in Alexandria, of the bishop's submission, of the expulsion of Origenism.

Except in Cassian's community in Scete, where Paphnutius succeeded in bringing round his congregation to the Origenist viewpoint, a violent agitation arose. A band of monks repaired to Alexandria and caused riots. Theophilus had courage. He went out to meet the approaching band, and, as soon as he could make himself heard, "When I see you," he said, "I see the face of God." "Then," said the leaders, "if you really believe that, condemn the works of Origen." Theophilus, whom Palladius nicknamed "Mr. Facing-both-ways," consented on the spot to condemn the Origenists. . . . He sent letters to his suffragans ordering the expulsion of the Origenist monks from the monasteries and the desert. There appears from

²⁰⁵Luibheid, *Cassian: Conferences*, 125-27.

this moment a drift out of Egypt by some members of the now condemned Origenist party.²⁰⁶

Finally, Augustine also provided evidence that fourth- and fifth-century Christian anthropomorphism was not confined to priests, monks, and laity. For instance, in “A Letter of Instruction to the Holy Brother, Fortunatianus (Epistle 148),” written in A.D. 413, Augustine discussed a brother bishop, not named, who was teaching that we are able, or at least will be able after the Resurrection, to see God with the eyes of our bodies. In a prior letter, without mentioning the bishop by name, Augustine had sharply rebuked those who held this view, and the bishop had been offended. Augustine asked Fortunatianus’s intercession on his behalf in seeking the bishop’s forgiveness and in effecting reconciliation. Nonetheless, Augustine said he had no regrets about having written the letter. For his intent was to

prevent men from believing that God Himself is corporeal and visible, as occupying a place determined by size and by distance from us (for the eye of this body can see nothing except under these conditions), and to prevent men from understanding the expression ‘face to face’ as if God were limited within the members of a body.²⁰⁷

Thereupon, Augustine argued at length against the bishop’s view.

On the basis of the evidence detailed above, it seems clear that Christians, from the very inception of the faith up until at least the early part of the fifth century, widely believed God to be an embodied being. This belief continued despite the fact that it was challenged by both Christian and non-Christian Platonists from at least the time of the second century. As Platonism became entrenched as the dominant Christian world view, the idea of an embodied God gradually faded into obscurity.

²⁰⁶Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 1968), 28–29. On the causes of the controversy and the subsequent expulsion of Origenists, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy* (Princeton: University Press, 1992). Chapter 2 focuses on anthropomorphism. For a tentative questioning of the generally accepted view that the Egyptian monks believed in an embodied God, see Graham Gould, “The Image of God and the Anthropomorphic Controversy in Fourth Century Monasticism,” in *Origeniana Quinta*, ed. Robert J. Daly (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 1992), 549–57.

²⁰⁷Philip Schaff, ed., *The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1956), 498. Note also that the bishop’s basis for his belief was apparently Old Testament, not incarnational, passages about God.