

NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTOLOGY, ATHANASIAN APOLOGETIC,
AND PAGAN POLEMIC

DAVID NEAL GREENWOOD

University of Aberdeen

dngreenwood@abdn.ac.uk

In the absence of full-scale creedal formulae, New Testament authors wrote of Christ the god-man utilizing language applied to God in the Old Testament. In the effort to emphasize the divinity and uniqueness of Christ, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews utilized three terms: καθαρὸς (10:22), δημιουργὸς (11:10), and δυνατὸς (11:19), all part of an extended passage treating God's sacrifice and man's resulting salvation. This theme and language crops up again in Athanasius of Alexandria, employed to defend and explain the incarnation of Christ, and then once more in Julian the Apostate, employed to appropriate characteristics of Christ for his pagan Christ parallel of Heracles.

The author of Hebrews displayed a high Christology, summed up in 1:8-10, where Christ was presented as deity, king, and creator, attributes that collectively, were exclusive to God in the Old Testament. Three characteristics that undergirded that claim: purity, power, and creativity, are found in an extended passage at Heb. 10:22 - 11:19 recounting the faith of those anticipating Christ's coming. Hebrews 10:22 refers to those with faith in Christ's salvific work having hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and bodies washed with pure (καθαρός) water, surely an allusion to Christian baptism, the same theme seen in John's Gospel, where Christ informed his

disciples that those He washed were clean indeed, and that His disciples were cleansed by the word which He had taught (John 10:11, 15:3). The readers of Hebrews likely looked back to God's promise to 'sprinkle clean water upon His people' (Ezekiel 36:25), but also may have seen this as an allusion to the Septuagint's use of καθαρός to describe Moses' vision of God (Exodus 24:10 LXX). Heb. 11:10 tells of how in faith Abraham sought an ideal city of divine foundations referring to a city whose builder and maker was God (πό λιν ἡς τεχνίτης καὶ δημιουργὸς ὁ θεός). Here, the two terms τεχνίτης and δημιουργός are used to describe the complementary aspects of God's plan and execution, although the particular term δημιουργός is rarer in Scripture, appearing again only in 2 Mac. 4:1.¹ The theme of God as creator is rather obvious from Genesis onward, but early Christian writings routinely attributed that creative role to the Word by whom all things were made, and who created all people and all things (Jn. 1:3; Eph. 2:9-10). Hebrews 11:19 reflects Abraham's awareness of Isaac's supernaturally instigated birth, which led him to look beyond his immediate circumstances with faith in the power (δυνατός) of God to raise the dead, and obediently be willing to offer his own son in sacrifice. This relationship is similar to what we see in Ephesians 1:19, where it is the greatness of God's power (δυνατός) which he wrought in Christ in his resurrection and ascent to heaven to sit at the Father's side.

These same three characteristics and their associated themes of sacrifice and salvation later found a home in a passage from the dual work *Contra Gentes - De Incarnatione* by Athanasius of Alexandria, no philosopher or rhetor, but widely

¹ G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1937), p. 104.

recognised for his ‘profound grasp of scriptural exegesis’.² For our purposes, the work’s dating, which has been placed between 318 and 336, is not critical, although the suggestion that it was written in 325-28 to establish credibility as a successor to bishop Alexander has much to commend it.³ He united these themes of purity, power, and creativity into a concise but potent description of Christ’s incarnation, which he described as utilising ‘a body pure (καθάρως) and truly unalloyed by intercourse with men. For he, although powerful (δυνατός) and the creator (δημιουργός) of the universe, fashioned for himself in the virgin a body as a temple’ (*De Inc.* 8.22-24; cf. 8.3). In this, he made use of the same themes found in the Epistle to the Hebrews, and using the same language. This passage is also wrapped up in themes of sacrifice and salvation: Athanasius is writing of the problem of sin: to obtain salvation for the human race required a holy sacrifice, but one in a material body, and the only solution, the incarnation of the Word, required the high Christology that Athanasius is known for. Athanasius evidently expected his audience to include both Christians and pagans, as he set his discussion of the incarnation directly in the context of the condemnation of pagan idolatry and rejection of the one true God (*De Inc.* 25).⁴

The Emperor Julian, who was attempting to restore the fortunes of paganism

2 The text and translation of Athanasius’ *De Incarnatione* is that of R. Thomson, ed., *Athanasius: Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); for Athanasius as an exegete, see p. xvii.

3 T. D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 13.

4 D. Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 68; cf. Thomson, p. xxii.

within the Roman Empire, regularly had his attention drawn to Athanasius. In two letters ‘To the Alexandrians’, he banished the ‘insolent’ Athanasius in late 361 and rejected a local petition for his return in autumn 362 (*Epp.* 110 and 111 Bidez). Not only did Julian make paganism the official religion once more, the last emperor to do so, he attempted to appropriate elements of Christianity that were resonating with the population. One of these elements was the feature of a personal saviour, again with the characteristics of purity, creativity, and power. In his *Or. 7 To the Cynic Heracleios*, written in early 362, Julian responded to a philosopher that had irritated him at court, but seized the opportunity to co-opt Athanasius’ description of Christ as seen above for his version of the god-man, Heracles, employing a Messianic motif that paralleled the New Testament portrayal of Christ.⁵

And I think of his journey across the open sea in a golden cup, though I will hold it was not truly a cup, but I believe he walked on the sea as upon dry land. For what was impossible to Heracles? What of the so-called elements enslaved to the creative and consummating power of his immaculate and pure mind did not hearken to his divine and most pure flesh? Him great Zeus through foreseeing Athena begat to be the saviour of the world.

Scholars have contested the significance of this for some time, with Pfister arguing that pagan accounts of Heracles influenced the creation of the gospel, Rose pointing out that in numerous instances the process flowed in the opposite direction, and

5 As argued in D. N. Greenwood, ‘Crafting Divine Personae in Julian’s *Oration 7*’, *Classical Philology* 109 (2014), 140-9. The text of Julian’s *Or. 7 To the Cynic Heracleios* is that of H.-U. Nesselrath, ed., *Iulianus Augustus: Opera* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015) and the translation is my own.

Simon arguing that Julian employed Heracles with Zeus and Athena intending to form a 'divine triad' resembling the Christian Trinity.⁶ Aune has also identified the link between Heracles and Christological themes in the Epistle to the Hebrews, including those of Son and High Priest.⁷ While water-walking frequently suggested magic to pagan authors (e.g., Lucian, *Philops.* 13), here Julian explained that Heracles owed this power to his innate command of the elements, a demonstration of his divinity similar to Christ's water-walking in the Gospels, a miracle that alluded to God's command of the elements in Genesis and Exodus, leading Christ's disciples to worship him (Mt. 14:22-33, Mk. 6:45-52, and Jn. 6:16-21; Gen. 1:1-10 and Ex. 14-15).⁸ Julian explained this by attributing the divine characteristics of creativity, power,

⁶ F. Pfister, 'Herakles und Christus', *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 34 (1937), 42-60; H. J. Rose, 'Herakles and the Gospels', *Harvard Theological Review* 31 (1938), 121; M. Simon, 'Early Christianity and Pagan Thought: Confluences and Conflicts', *Religious Studies* 9 (1973), 392, although re. Simon's claim, see D. N. Greenwood, 'A Cautionary Note on Julian's Pagan Trinity', *Ancient Philosophy* 33 (2013), 391-402.

⁷ D. E. Aune, 'Heracles and Christ: Heracles Imagery in the Christology of Early Christianity', in D. L. Balch, E. Ferguson, and W. A. Meeks, eds., *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 13-15.

⁸ The Gospel of Matthew appears to be Julian's source here, given his preference for Matthew demonstrated elsewhere in this oration at 229cd-233d, paralleling Mt. 3:7-4:10. D. N. Greenwood, 'A Pagan Emperor's Appropriation of Matthew's Gospel', *Expository Times* 125 (2014) 593-98.

and purity to the newly Christ-like Heracles: ‘What of the so-called elements enslaved to the creative (δημιουργική) and consummating power (δύναμις) of his immaculate and pure (καθαρός) mind did not hearken to his divine and most pure flesh?’ (*Or.* 7.219d-220a). While these characteristics had been touched on before in pagan literature, their use in conjunction, particularly in a passage co-opting the description of Christ, points to Athanasius as a more likely source than the Epistle to the Hebrews, which he only referenced one time (*C. Gal.* 155d, citing Heb. 12:29). Julian’s unique portrayal was then extended to birth from a virgin mother, as Julian changed Heracles’ conception via through intercourse between Zeus and the human woman Alcmena, to ‘being brought forth from’ Zeus and foreseeing Athena, the virgin goddess (*Or.* 7.220a). Later in this same oration, Julian ascribes the same origins to himself at 230a and 232d, where Athena also played the guardian to both the divine Heracles and the divinely chosen Julian, this assimilation revealing the emperor’s political purpose. As to the theological purpose of this passage, paganism receives a figure ‘begat to be saviour of the world’ in similar vein to its rival Christianity (*Or.* 7.220a). While the theme of sacrifice was not present, nor need we demand that from a non-Christian Neoplatonist, we do see Zeus summon his son Heracles back to himself in heaven (*Or.* 7.220a). While *Or.* 7 was written at the beginning of Julian’s reign, he has been correctly assessed as consistently intolerant towards Christianity from the beginning.⁹ This motif fits into the general thrust of his polemic against Christianity, one recent evaluation of which has highlighted Julian’s interest in

⁹ G. W. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 81.

Christology in his *C. Gal.*¹⁰

In all three of these texts, we see the authors making use of the three characteristics of purity, power, and creativity, with all three additionally tied together by the theological themes of salvation and sacrifice, adding to the case for intertextuality. This material, then, was used successively to make the case for Christ's divinity, the necessity for Christ's incarnation, and to craft a Christ-like Heracles to compete with Christianity.

Table 1. Terminology.

Theme	Hebrews	Athanasius, <i>De Inc.</i>	Julian, <i>Or. 7</i>
Purity	καθαρός	καθαρός	καθαρός
Power	δυνατός	δυνατός	δύναμις
Creator	δημιουργός	δημιουργός	δημιουργικός

¹⁰ E. D. Hunt, 'The Christian context of Julian's *Against the Galileans*', in N. Baker-Brian and S. Tougher, eds., *Emperor and Author: The Writings of Julian the Apostate* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2012), p. 254.