

**A PROPOSED MODEL FOR UNDERSTANDING TERTULLIAN'S
DOCTRINE OF THE SOUL**

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares different theological claims that were made about the soul in Hellenistic philosophy, Second Temple Judaism, and early Christianity, and shows through the use of a new theoretical model that these claims cannot be grouped by religion. Doctrinal claims about the soul can instead be grouped into one of three main fields of theological inquiry: the *physis* versus *nomos* debate; the *nomos* versus the Divine debate; or the *physis* versus the Divine debate. These three debates have operated in parallel within Christianity since its inception. The Gospel of Mark provides evidence that Jesus' own teachings on the soul may have been part of a novel solution to the *physis*-Divine debate. By contrast, Tertullian's detailed doctrine of the soul, presented in *The Soul's Testimony* and *A Treatise on the Soul*, draws on the traditions of the *nomos*-Divine debate, and yields very different claims than those presented in Mark. Tertullian's doctrine of the soul, and his related doctrine of original sin, have exerted great influence on the orthodox Christian understanding of the soul. The church today has the option of reexamining the history of early Christian soul doctrines and assessing the three parallel strands of thought to uncover a previously overlooked biblically-based understanding of the soul that can meet today's pastoral needs.

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INTRODUCTION

Much uncertainty exists today in The United Church of Canada with regard to questions about the soul. In this paper, I suggest some reasons for this uncertainty, and I show using a new theoretical model one way we might freshly examine the history of early doctrines of the soul and their continuing influence on the church. The new theoretical model is used to assess the novel doctrine of the soul formulated by Tertullian. Tertullian was chosen for study because his treatises have played a pivotal role in shaping orthodox Christian thought about the soul. In particular, Tertullian's fusion of earlier soul doctrines produced a new and highly influential doctrine of original sin that was to have major implications for Christian theology.

Doctrines of the soul played an important role in the evolution of early Christian thought. Early thinkers such as Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, and Augustine of Hippo wrote extensively on the soul, and some, including Tertullian, referred to these understandings as doctrines of the soul. Although in later centuries the early doctrines of the soul were subsumed within the more familiar doctrines of creation, of original sin, and of last things, nonetheless there is an established history of doctrines specifically related to the soul. In this paper, I therefore use the earlier terminology of "doctrine of the soul" rather than the more recent terminology that divides early soul doctrines into the categories of creation, sin, and eschatology. The original usage is helpful because it highlights the importance and the cohesive nature of early Christian doctrines about the soul.

In Chapter One, I introduce two influential treatises written by Tertullian on the topic of the soul and show that his doctrines of soul and original sin remain, to this day, an important source of orthodox language for theological discussions about the soul. His understanding of the

soul is not the only option available to Christians, however. Other theories exist to aid us in understanding the soul in relation to God (including the existential option that souls do not exist), but there has been little scholarly examination of the issue. A theoretical model to contribute to fresh debate is therefore proposed.

In Chapter Two, the antecedents of Tertullian's soul doctrine are examined by applying the theoretical model to doctrines of the soul taught within Judaism, Hellenism, the Pauline letters, and the Gospel of Mark. This analysis clearly shows that no unified doctrine of the soul existed within any of these traditions. Instead, there was a wide range of opinion about the nature of the soul. Each school's position on the soul reflected both a specific theological tension and the need to resolve that tension. Resolution rested in part upon distinctive but coherent doctrines, including doctrines of the soul. I attempt to establish that Jesus, like his predecessors and contemporaries, had a specific understanding of the soul. For the purposes of establishing what Jesus' early *kerygma* on the soul might have been, I use the Gospel of Mark. Mark is the earliest of the gospels, and it is also the gospel with the most consistent presentation of Jesus as a teacher whose controversial message about God ran counter to first century CE Mediterranean cultural expectations.

In Chapter Three, I return to Tertullian's two treatises on the soul and examine their content with the aid of the theoretical model. In this way, I am able to demonstrate that Tertullian's soul doctrine draws on a particular body of theological thought that has strong links to Plato, apocalyptic literature, and Paul, but has no verifiable connection to the teachings of Jesus as they are presented in Mark. Since little research has been done on Jesus' own understanding of the soul, I suggest this as a starting point to help us uncover a holistic approach to the soul in the church today.

CHAPTER ONE

At the turning point between the second and third centuries CE, in the important Roman African city of Carthage, the convert to Christianity whom we know as Tertullian (c.160-225) entered the debate on the meaning of Christ. He turned his considerable skills in rhetoric toward the task of defending a school of Christian thought that would later be known as orthodoxy. Thirty-one of his writings survive, all written in Latin. Among Christians, Tertullian is perhaps best known for his early Trinitarian formulation, a formulation that eventually won acceptance in the third and fourth centuries and was taken up in modified form in the Creeds. Although today's scholars are quick to note Tertullian's impatience, sharp invective, and legalistic argumentation,¹ Tertullian is generally regarded in a positive light as an important pre-Nicene church father whose thought significantly influenced two later Christian theologians who also hailed from Latin-speaking North Africa: Cyprian of Carthage (c. 200-258) and Augustine of Hippo (354-430).

Sometime in the early third century, perhaps around 207, Tertullian underwent a further shift in his theological understanding, a shift away from Christian apologetics that combined polemic with moderation towards polemic alone, with the target of these later uncompromising treatises being the church itself. Scholars disagree on whether he actually left the church at this point, or was arguing from within it for change.² Nonetheless, at least ten of his later writings

¹ Eric Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 143; Justo L. González, *From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon*, Vol.1 of *A History of Christian Thought*. Rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 172.

² Timothy David Barnes analyses Tertullian's treatises in an attempt to piece together the chronology of his shift into Montanism. Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 42-48. González writes that Tertullian left the communion of the African church in about 207 CE. González,

show the influence of Montanism,³ a stringently ascetic “new prophecy” movement that had been founded in Asia Minor in the mid second century by a former pagan named Montanus and two female prophets, Priscilla and Maximilla. Tertullian was attracted to the moral rigour of Montanism, a rigour he found wanting in the church,⁴ and he shifted the focus of his later writings to ethical concerns: monogamy, fasting, modesty, chastity, and penitence.

The context of Tertullian’s theological development – pagan, then Christian, then Montanist-Christian – is important to Christianity today because Tertullian was the early author not only of proto-Trinitarianism, but also of another less well known but perhaps equally influential Christian doctrine, one that has shaped orthodox thought about the nature of the human soul for eighteen hundred years. This is Tertullian’s doctrine of the soul, from which he derived his related doctrine of original sin. These doctrines, mediated through the writings of Augustine of Hippo, have cast a long shadow on our relationship with God in the Christian church. The history of how Tertullian’s doctrine of the soul emerged – which thinkers may have influenced Tertullian, and how he reworked earlier doctrines of the soul to forge a new theological solution – will be the focus of chapter 3.

The modern reader, for various reasons, may be surprised to learn that Tertullian devoted two treatises (that we know of) to the topic of the soul: *The Soul’s Testimony*, which is fairly

From the Beginnings, 172. Robert Sider states that a debate exists, but offers no opinion of his own. Robert D. Sider, ed., *Christian and Pagan in the Roman Empire: The Witness of Tertullian* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), xi, 139n. Eric Osborn thinks that, on balance, the evidence points to Tertullian’s not being a schismatic. Osborn, *Tertullian*, 176-177. David Rankin contends that Tertullian never left the church. David Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 28-29.

³ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 44.

⁴ González, *From the Beginnings*, 172.

short at six chapters, and the lengthy *A Treatise on the Soul*, which scholars have divided into fifty-eight chapters.⁵ Our surprise at such an extensive treatment of the soul perhaps stems from our own hermeneutical perspective. The mainline Protestant church of today demonstrates a guardedness about the soul. It is not much discussed, either within the congregations of The United Church of Canada, or within the pages of recent systematic theology.⁶ Indeed, doctrines of the soul have become so troublesome in churches oriented toward holistic faith that Maas and O'Donnell can say in the introduction to their book, *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church*, that “[c]ontemporary theology tends to avoid the term ‘soul,’ claiming that it suggests an unhealthy dualism in our understanding of the human person; yet modern theologians have not succeeded in finding a satisfactory substitute for the ancient usage. The word ‘soul’ was and still is used to indicate that personal, *essential* self in relationship to God.”⁷

Apart from our reluctance to speak of the soul for fear of endorsing dualism, I would suggest that a further factor contributing to our reticence is the prevailing belief that there is not much in the way of scriptural support for a doctrine of the soul. In Protestant churches, this apparent lack of scriptural authority is more than just a stumbling block. It is a major impediment to discussions about the soul. This may explain in part why the United Church has no official doctrine of the soul: it is believed we have no appropriate starting point or language from the canon for discussing the relationship of soul and God. Meanwhile, publication of the

⁵ With translator’s footnotes, the English translation of *A Treatise on the Soul* is almost 50,000 words long – the length of some single-title non-fiction books on the market today.

⁶ Listings for “soul” are now rare in the indices of acclaimed systematic textbooks.

⁷ Robin Maas and Gabriel O’Donnell, ed., *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 15.

Nag Hammadi texts and numerous popular and scholarly discussions about Gnostic traditions have introduced Gnosticism's language about the soul into the public consciousness.⁸ Since this language is frightening, with its myth of souls trapped in a world of evil matter, there is even more reason for us to disavow the topic and move on to issues we are more comfortable with, such as ministry, mission, and social justice.⁹

A third possible factor underlies Jean Stairs's observation that "[w]hile the public's interest in soul matters is surging, Protestant churches continue to flounder in their response to this phenomenon."¹⁰ Part of the reason for our floundering may be that we fear we would be walking on very thin ice, scientifically speaking, if we were to entertain notions of the soul. We wish our theological statements to be consistent with observable science – or at least not to be in irreconcilable opposition to science – and we are not at all convinced that either miracles or the soul have a place in the modern scientific world or the modern United Church. The soul has therefore been relegated to the province of church historians, who can study the history of doctrines of the soul, and to the sphere of religious scholars who study Christian mysticism and

⁸ Bart Ehrman gives a good introduction to recent scholarship on Gnosticism in his 2006 book *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), 99-112.

⁹ The Gospel of Thomas, found at Nag Hammadi, contains only the sayings of Jesus and does not include the Gnostic myth, but, as Ehrman points out, "many of its sayings appear to *pre-suppose* the myth and to make sense only if you read them in light of the myth." Ehrman, *Lost Gospel of Judas*, 102. Although some Christians express concern about Gnosticism's dualistic claims, Richard Smoley, in his 2006 book *Forbidden Faith: The Secret History of Gnosticism* argues for a revival of Gnosticism because "Christianity today often resembles an egg into which someone has poked a hole and sucked out all its contents, and then taken the shell, encrusted it with gold and jewels, and set it up as an object of veneration [This prevents people from having a] "vital inner experience that enables us to know directly the truth of what we seek." Richard Smoley, *Forbidden Faith: The Secret History of Gnosticism* (2006; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 8-9.

¹⁰ Jean Stairs, *Listening for the Soul: Pastoral Care and Spiritual Direction* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 3.

its attendant claims for the soul.¹¹

Finally, turning once again to Tertullian's lengthy assertions about the soul, there is the possibility (usually unvoiced) that we simply do not *like* the doctrines of the soul that have been handed down to us through Tertullian and his interpreters, and we find it easier to stop talking about the soul than to embrace an orthodox doctrine that makes little sense to us in our current context. We can acknowledge that Tertullian's adamant assertions about the human body and soul arose from a desire to refute the docetic claims of groups such as the Valentinian Gnostics and the Marcionites. We can appreciate that Tertullian's context was different from our own, that he was responding to well-known doctrines of the soul that had preceded him in Platonic thought, apocalyptic literature, and early Christian gnosticisms. At the same time, it is difficult for us to accept a theory founded so firmly on Tertullian's own interpretation of a single verse in scripture, Genesis 2:7: "the Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being." Based on this verse, Tertullian concluded that God gave Adam a soul through the breath of life, but that Eve's soul was a transmission from Adam's soul, and thereafter every human child received his body from the body of his parents, and *also* his non-preexistent soul from the souls of his human parents.¹²

Following this logic, there is only one soul in all of humankind – the soul given to Adam by God,

¹¹ There seems to be considerable scholarly interest of late in apophatic mysticism, which addresses the "infinite otherness" of God: see Bernard McGinn, "Positive and Negative Ways to God" in *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York: ModernLibrary– Random House, 2006), 281. In 2008, the scholarly journal *Modern Theology* devoted an entire issue to the sixth century apophatic mystic Pseudo-Dionysius, with 14 articles in total that deal with the "current Dionysian revival." See Sarah Coakley, "Introduction – Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite," *Modern Theology* 24, no.4 (2008): 531-540.

¹² Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul*, trans. Peter Holmes, in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, American ed., ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 3 of *Anti-Nicene Fathers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, n.d.), chap. 4, 27 and 36. Also in Tertullian, *The Soul's Testimony*, trans. S. Thelwall, in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, American ed., ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 3 of *Anti-Nicene Fathers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, n.d.), chap. 3.

which was transmitted in an unbroken line to Eve, and thence to all subsequent generations.

On the basis of this assertion, Tertullian then claimed that because a child's soul is derived from the souls of its parents, the child's soul necessarily inherits the parents' inclination to sinfulness. This doctrine of biological transmission of sin is known as "traducianism."¹³ (By contrast, "creationism" is a doctrine that asserts each soul is created by God at the moment each body is conceived.) Although the theory of biological inheritance of sin was first condemned in 498 by Pope Anastasius and renounced again in 1341 by Pope Benedict XII,¹⁴ the church preserved the doctrine of original sin by reinterpreting it. Thus, following Thomas Aquinas, the Roman Catholic church saw original sin as a state of being that becomes sin when humans voluntarily make harmful choices. Protestantism went further, and reinterpreted original sin as an "active power" or inner impulse to sin – an idea that has its roots in Augustinian, and possibly Pauline, thought.¹⁵ From the point of view of today's liberal Protestant churches, the orthodox belief that souls are inescapably tainted by original sin may be even less palatable than other available choices, such as an existentialist belief in human consciousness without any soul at all. Without doubt, there are many people today who would rather live their lives according to the "no-soul theory" than profess a relationship with God where the soul comes shackled in original sin. There is an understandable desire in the church to sidestep the issue altogether. Yet the

¹³ González, *From the Beginnings*, 183.

¹⁴ J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, ed., *The Christian Faith: In the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, rev. ed. (London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1982), 122.

¹⁵ Linwood Urban reviews how Augustine solidified the "traditional view" of doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin that had been developing through the writings of Paul, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and Athanasius. He also discusses modern responses to the "traditional view" epitomized by Augustine. Linwood Urban, *A Short History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 125-155.

issue remains important today because our understanding of soul – its origin, its relationship to the body, its fate (or lack therefore) after the death of the body, and its relationship to God – helps us shape the choices we make as human beings. For instance, a person who firmly believes that good souls are trapped in evil, corrupt bodies will not treat the human body in the same respectful manner as a person who believes that the body is essentially a good creation, infused with the breath of God.

If these five options – dualism, Gnosticism, science, orthodoxy, and existentialism – were the only ones available to us for understanding the soul and the soul's relationship with God, then the United Church's discretion on soul matters might represent the better part of valour. However, I would suggest there is another option available to us for understanding the soul, one that emerges from careful examination and comparison of early doctrines of the soul in Greek, Judaic, and early Christian thought. This comparison yields the surprising conclusion that a holistic doctrine of the soul not only exists in scripture, but is in fact one of the distinctive features of Jesus' theology. Although recognition of this early *kerygma* could provide today's Protestant church with scriptural language for talking about the soul, the problem we now face is one of tension between the teachings of Jesus as they were recorded in the Synoptics and the teachings of later Christian interpreters. This tension has created a host of hermeneutical difficulties that continue to plague us today.

That theological tensions exist is no surprise. Research into the history of doctrinal development is, of necessity, research into the history of ongoing debates and disputes that have not always been resolved amicably. Many excellent books tell us *what* happened over the

centuries.¹⁶ Fewer books offer theoretical frameworks to help us understand *why* these debates raged. In this paper, I propose a theoretical framework that has the potential to assist in the task of analysing “why.” Like all such models, it is a simplification, presented so that complex interactions can be narrowed for the purpose of study. Hanson and Oakman, following Bruce Malina, describe this process well as it is used in the study of the biblical social world:

The goal of modeling is not to force data into a preconceived mold or pigeonhole. Rather, it presents a hypothesis of a meaningful configuration of the known data and the presentation of a believable scenario for human relationships. The idea is to account for the available data, not dispense with data that does not conform to a preconceived model. It also facilitates proposals to account for missing data.¹⁷

The model I propose is shown in diagrammatic format in figure 1, Schematic Model for the Theological “Trilemma.” This figure is elaborated on in tables 1, 2, and 3. Although a much longer paper would be needed to examine this model in detail, in the current paper I will use this model to examine three major streams of theological thought that have all, in their own way, used doctrines of the soul to resolve issues of religious and political authority. By placing the different doctrines of the soul mentioned above into this framework, it is easier to see in what way Tertullian’s theology differs markedly from that of Jesus in the Synoptics. The contrast between these two demonstrates clearly that doctrines of the soul do *not* line up neatly according to the respective religious tradition from which each emerged. In other words, there is not a soul doctrine that is unique to Judaism, a different soul doctrine that is unique to Hellenism, and a

¹⁶ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1977); Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971- 1989); Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, in *A Complete History of Christian Thought*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1968).

¹⁷ K.C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 10-11.

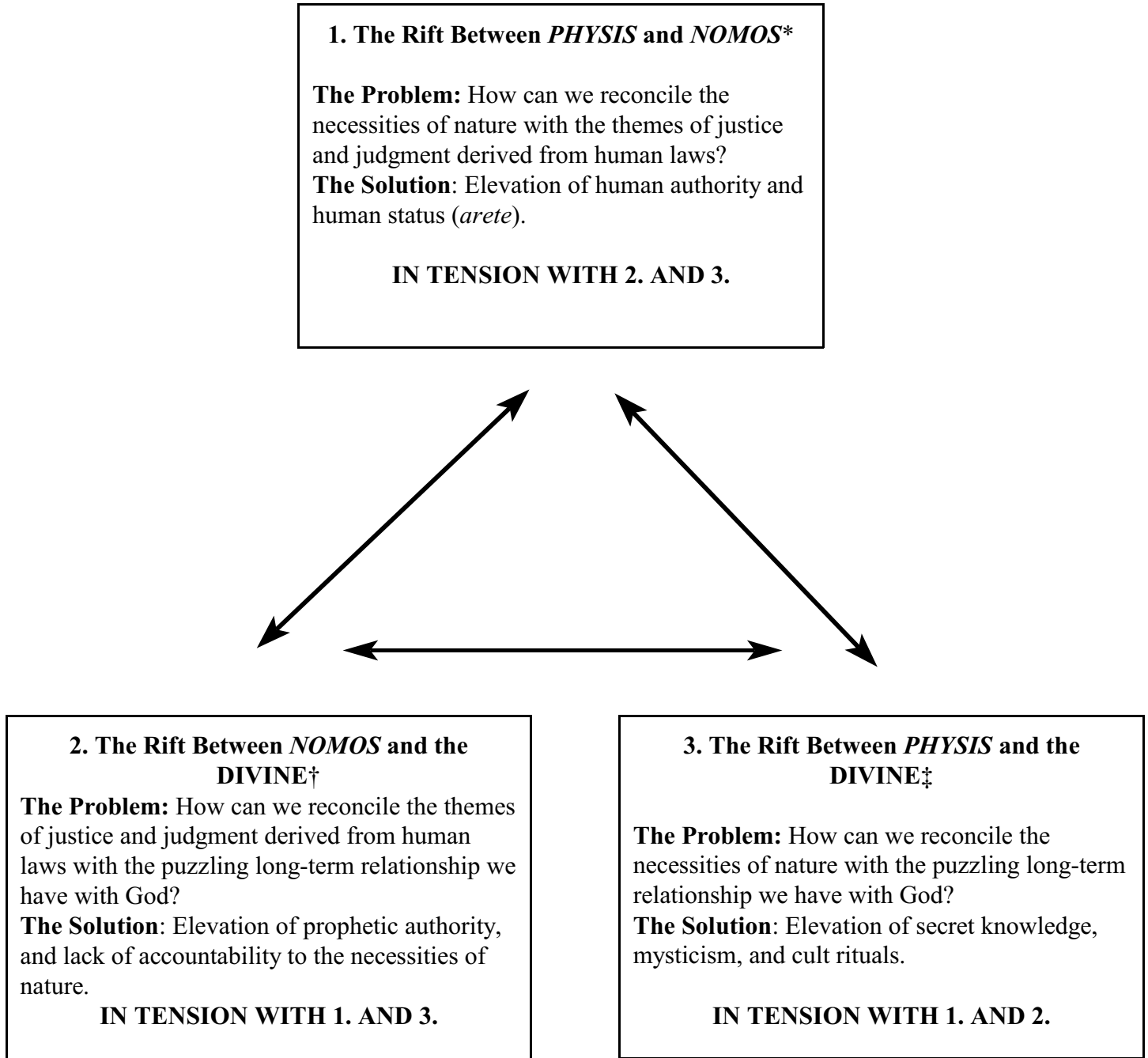


Figure 1. Schematic Model for the Theological “Trilemma”

* See Table 1, page 16.
 † See Table 2, page 17.
 ‡ See Table 3, page 18.

third one found only in Christianity. Instead, a distinctive three-fold pattern exists, a pattern that is shared among Judaism, Greek religion/ philosophy, and early Christianity, and this three-fold pattern is the basis of the model I am proposing. This three-fold pattern, or “trilemma” as I have chosen to call it, partly explains the “why” of fierce theological debate. It also helps explain why we are so confused today about the nature of the soul.

The pattern I am proposing as a theological framework to help us analyse our current confusion arose in response to observations made by Walter Burkert in his book *Greek Religion*. Towards the end of this important book, Burkert discusses the religious and philosophical crisis that erupted in the fifth century BCE when sophists and atheists undermined Greek religious certainty with their observations about *nomos* and *physis*:

Nomos, meaning both custom and law, becomes a central concept of sophistic thought. Laws are made by men and can be altered arbitrarily. And what is tradition if not the sum of such ordinances? Horizons are extended through travel and the reports of travel: with growing interest men became aware of foreign peoples among whom everything is different, witness the ethnographic digressions of Herodotus. In this way the unquestioned assumptions of custom can easily be shaken. The discovery of the changeability of custom becomes particularly dangerous when *nomos* is set in opposition to *physis*, a concept provided by the philosophy of nature where it is used to denote the growing of the cosmos and of all things contained in it from their own laws. Archelaos, a pupil of Anaxagoras, is supposed to have been the first to formulate this antithesis about 440 BC: the just and the unjust, the ugly and the beautiful are not defined by *physis* but by *nomos*, by arbitrarily changing human convention.

But it was on tradition, *nomos*, that religion primarily rested, as the Greeks knew well. Its foundations were seen to be threatened, at least in theory, as a result of the questioning of *nomos*.¹⁸

Burkert then goes on to outline how pre-Socratic thinkers such as Heraclitus, Empedocles, Sophocles, and Diogenes of Apollonia “delivered” the pious from this crisis of uncertainty by asserting that “[t]here are laws of *eusebeia* which are [rooted in heaven, removed from human

¹⁸ Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan (1977; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 312-313.

caprice, and eternal like the cosmos itself.”¹⁹ Thus, concludes Burkert, “nature speculation provides a starting-point from which to close the rift between *physis* and *nomos*, and so to give a new, unshakeable foundation for piety.”²⁰

“The rift between *physis* and *nomos*” is a phrase so powerful, so meaningful, that it seems almost paradigmatic, and Burkert’s recognition of the pattern opened the door to a pursuit by this author of other such paradigmatic rifts. This line of enquiry led to the observation that there seem to be two other major rifts: the rift between *nomos* and the Divine, and the rift between *physis* and the Divine. Each of these rifts is not a simple duality but rather a complex philosophical/theological tension that encompasses perennial questions about what it means to be human, and what it means to be a human in relationship with God.

The three-fold pattern I suggest here can be represented by the triangle shown in figure 1. Each point of the triangle represents one of the three rifts. Although other writers have proposed three-point triangles to highlight both doctrinal and scholarly incongruities,²¹ what distinguishes the “trilemma” from other three-point models is the fact that each point in the proposed triangular scheme represents not a single concept but a complex tension between two difficult-to-reconcile concepts that seem to be separated by a rift. Each of these rifts, on its own, represents a valid question. For instance, it is perfectly valid for religious seekers to ask in what way human

¹⁹ Ibid., 318.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Dr. William Morrow pointed out to his Winter 2009 Hebrew Scriptures class the triangular models of Mattitiah Tsevat and James Barr respectively. Tsevat’s model shows the doctrinal dilemma of the Book of Job, which can be summarized as “just Creator, just persons, just rewards: pick two.” Mattitiah Tsevat, “The Meaning of the Book of Job,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 37 (1966), 73-106. James Barr presents a threefold process for studying the Bible – referential, intentional, and poetic – in *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1973), 61. James Rives, however, comes closest to the model I’m suggesting when he describes the three kinds of advantage offered by religion in the Greco-Roman period: (1) traditional benefits, (2) intensification, and (3) salvation. James. B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 168-179.

laws and traditions should (or could) align with the laws of nature (*nomos* in tension with *physis*; table 1); or in what way religious laws are (or could be) made in the image of our relationship with God (*nomos* in tension with the Divine; table 2);²² or in what way the actual laws of nature reflect our relationship with a God who allows death and suffering (*physis* in tension with the Divine; table 3). These are all straightforward and important themes of theology. What is not straightforward is the way in which the answers to these questions gradually resulted in three divergent theological solutions, as shown on tables 1, 2, and 3. Each of these three theological solutions presents a different view of who God is, and how we can be in relationship with God. These solutions are mutually incompatible. For instance, if you “cut and paste” the three different versions of how God is perceived in these three different solutions (that is, if you try to put them all together on one point in the centre of the triangle), you arrive at a God who is *simultaneously* distant and transcendent, fully immanent, unchanging, emotionally detached, interventionist, emotionally involved, in conditional relationship with us, in unconditional relationship with us, and proleptically in relationship with us. This simply cannot be, unless one resorts to the time-honoured tradition of explaining away overt contradictions as *mysterion*.²³

What emerges upon examination of the “trilemma” is the extent to which these three

²² As the entry on *nomos* in the New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology points out, “[t]he legal, ethical and religious meanings of *nomos* are inseparable in antiquity, for all goods were believed to come from the gods, who upheld order in the universe and in relations between men Philosophy (even that of the Sophists), kept alive the awareness that, since human laws are so fallible, man cannot exist unless he conforms to cosmic, universal law Whereas the Sophists criticized the idea of absolute validity attaching to *nomos*, Plato and Aristotle each in his own way connected it with the *nous*, the human spirit, and thereby once again with the divine.” Hans-Helmut Esser, “Law, Custom, Elements,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, rev. ed., ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 439.

²³ Although I am a practising mystic, I would not want to fall back on the excuse of *mysterion* to try to force these different images onto a single page. Mystery as a concept can be dangerous when used as a catchall to smooth over doctrinal inconveniences or to uphold church authority at the expense of the oppressed. The church needs mystery – but it does not need the kind that has been used to justify longstanding abuses in the church towards women and the disadvantaged.

theological solutions are mutually incompatible. The *questions* that underlie the three points are not incompatible; but the *solutions* that have arisen and been accepted as dogma over many centuries are very much incompatible. A person who attempts to hold all three solutions together as a unified whole is likely to end up confused at the very least. Yet for centuries Christians have been trying to do this very thing. Before that, the people of Judah/Israel and the people of classical Greece wrestled with the same confusion. This is not a new problem. But until we recognize it as a reality that is causing us problems, and until we look for new ways to de-complicate our Protestant theology, we will continue to be confused about our relationship with God.

This same confusion manifests in our current understanding of the soul, which, as I will show in the next two chapters, presents a theological solution based on only one point of the trilemma – the *nomos*-Divine rift – while using a confusing blend of vocabulary that seems to point to the other two points as well. Thus we will see the emergence of a soul doctrine that means one thing while ostensibly saying another. The intent of this soul doctrine is to entrench the inviolability of divine contract laws (the *nomos*-Divine rift), but it refers often to the language of free will (*physis-nomos* rift) and of mystery (*physis*-Divine rift). In this context, it is little wonder that today's church is so reticent about the soul – at present, the orthodox understanding of the soul makes no sense!

Table 1. THE RIFT BETWEEN *PHYSIS* AND *NOMOS*

THE THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM:	THE RIFT BETWEEN <i>PHYSIS</i> AND <i>NOMOS</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we reconcile the necessities of nature (<i>physis</i>, for example the reality of death and suffering in the world) with the themes of justice and judgment derived from human laws (<i>nomos</i>)?
The Psychological Issue That Is Being Addressed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of abandonment and lack of protection from God/gods
How God Is Perceived:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God is transcendent, unchanging, unemotional Judge; God's relationship with humanity is <u>conditional</u>
Examples of Pre-Christian Sources That Attempt to Point Out What the Problem Is:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-Socratic philosophy • Ecclesiastes
The Biblical Archetype:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ADAM
THE THEOLOGICAL SOLUTION:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fear of abandonment leads to a need to elevate human authority (authority of the individual and/or authority of the centralized government) so that divine approval can be actively pursued through human effort; human authority is strengthened when it is claimed that human law is really just a manifestation of <i>divine</i> law
The Practical and Inevitable Result (i.e. What Is the “Fruit” of This Theology?):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • elevation of human <i>arete</i> (success, accomplishment, status), arrived at by living a daily life of virtue based on laws of religion combined with laws of polis/human monarchy/divine monarchy; summed up in the idea of <i>tradition</i>
Main Tool That Humans Are Supposed to Use:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>nous</i>, reason
Main Virtue That Humans Are to Practice:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • piety, obedience to laws of daily practice (<i>praxis</i>)
EXAMPLES OF PHILOSOPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS WRITINGS That Attempt to Close the Rift Between <i>PHYSIS</i> and <i>NOMOS</i>:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-Socratic laws of <i>eusebia</i> (including a doctrine of the soul) • theological synthesis of the Deuteronomistic history (Joshua to 2 Kings) • Genesis 2-3 • Ancient Near East Wisdom literature (eg. Proverbs)
BENEFITS of This Theological “Package”:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God responds favourably to human beings who choose to live virtuously. Therefore, humans who live virtuously don't have to fear abandonment by God; they can use their human free will and their human reason in combination with divine law, and thereby reduce their psychological stress
SHORTCOMINGS of This Theological “Package” (i.e. New Problems That Are Created By It):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • blame for the suffering of individuals and communities falls upon the shoulders of individual people (eg. “You didn't try hard enough” or “You obviously must have offended God”); this shortcoming is attested in Job • hierarchical society is favoured, in which the “best” are always at the “top”, leading to entrenched discrimination against women, the poor, the disabled, and so on; this shortcoming is attested in Mark and Q

Table 2. THE RIFT BETWEEN *NOMOS* AND THE DIVINE

THE THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM:	THE RIFT BETWEEN <i>NOMOS</i> AND THE DIVINE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we reconcile the themes of justice and judgment derived from human laws (<i>nomos</i>) with the puzzling long-term relationship we have with God?
The Psychological Issue That Is Being Addressed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of not being chosen to be among God’s elect
How God Is Perceived:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God is transcendent King; God is not immanent at present, but will come in the future “on that day”; God’s relationship with humanity is both unconditional <u>and</u> conditional (only for the elect is the relationship unconditional)
Examples of Pre-Christian Sources That Attempt to Point Out What the Problem Is:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First Isaiah • Job
The Biblical Archetype:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MOSES IN EXILE
THE THEOLOGICAL SOLUTION:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fear of not being chosen leads to elevated authority of select prophets (possibly anointed) who can accurately convey the terms of the irrevocable contract laws that God has established to benefit the elect
The Practical and Inevitable Result (i.e. What Is the “Fruit” of This Theology?):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of accountability to the necessities of nature (<i>physis</i>); therefore, increasingly irrational promises can be made (eg. guarantees of a future resurrection of the body); lack of accountability to <i>physis</i> results in fideism (i.e. faith which is not balanced by reason or measurable input from the physical senses)
Main Tool That Humans Are Supposed to Use:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prophecy/prophecy fulfillment (which requires a manipulation of historical timelines and sense of time)
Main Virtue That Humans Are to Practice:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hope in a <u>future</u> salvation
EXAMPLES OF PHILOSOPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS WRITINGS That Attempt to Close the Rift Between <i>NOMOS</i> and THE DIVINE:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sinai Covenant; Second Isaiah • Plato (including doctrines of the soul) • apocalyptic literature • proto-Gnosticism • Paul
BENEFITS of This Theological “Package”:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God responds favourably to certain human beings, but since human beings have no say in the mysterious process of election, they don’t have to feel guilty about their own suffering; it’s out of their hands, and all they can do is try to be ready “on that day” by never giving up hope • the irrevocable nature of the covenants provides deep psychological reassurance that relationship with God is guaranteed for the group that is chosen; this group has less to fear from God on Judgment Day
SHORTCOMINGS of This Theological “Package” (i.e. New Problems That Are Created By It):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hierarchical religion is favoured, in which the elect have more rights and privileges with God than other people do; this leads to discrimination against people who hold other religious belief systems • the focus on the contract rights of humans (to the exclusion of other aspects of Creation) leads to anthropocentric abuses

Table 3. THE RIFT BETWEEN *PHYSIS* AND THE DIVINE

THE THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM:	THE RIFT BETWEEN <i>PHYSIS</i> AND THE DIVINE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we reconcile the necessities of nature (<i>physis</i>, for example the reality of death and suffering in the world) with the puzzling long-term relationship we have with God?
The Psychological Issue That Is Being Addressed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of not being able to feel God’s presence
How God Is Perceived:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God is immanent, emotional, interventionist Creator; God’s relationship with humanity is <u>unconditional</u>
Examples of Pre-Christian Sources That Attempt to Point Out What the Problem Is:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psalms of Lament; Lamentations 5 • Genesis 6:1-9:17
The Biblical Archetype:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ABRAHAM IN EXILE
THE THEOLOGICAL SOLUTION:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the path to knowing God is not easy or straight from the human point of view, but there is order in God’s creation, and this underlying order can be uncovered and emulated; secret knowledge can trigger the unique, transformative, spiritual experiences of the divine that people yearn for (but fear they won’t get)
The Practical and Inevitable Result (i.e. What Is the “Fruit” of This Theology?):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • elevation of mysticism and cult rituals that purport to facilitate religious ecstasy and union of humans with the divine; belief in miracles and other interventionist divine acts; authority of priests is enhanced
Main Tool That Humans Are Supposed to Use:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relationships based on emotion (eg. <i>eros</i>, <i>agape</i>)
Main Virtue That Humans Are to Practice:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • faith
EXAMPLES OF PHILOSOPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS WRITINGS That Attempt to Close the Rift Between <i>PHYSIS</i> and THE DIVINE:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zion & Enthronement Psalms; Psalms of Thanksgiving • Zion Covenant • Genesis 1 • Mysteries (eg. Eleusinian) • Jesus’ kingdom parables (including a doctrine of the soul)
BENEFITS of This Theological “Package”:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People can trust that God is close at hand and hears their prayers; religious justification is given to family/clan/cult loyalties over and above political loyalties
SHORTCOMINGS of This Theological “Package” (i.e. New Problems That Are Created By It):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • open attitude towards mystical practices makes believers vulnerable to abuse from charlatans and/or unethical religious leaders; this shortcoming is attested in Deuteronomy 18 and 2 Corinthians 10-13 • mystical and occult practices may exacerbate or even trigger major mental illness (eg. major depression, substance abuse disorders, psychotic disorders, dissociative disorders); this shortcoming is inductively attested in Mark

CHAPTER TWO

It is an axiom of recent socio-historical criticism that in the ancient Mediterranean world of the first century politics and religion were inseparable. Recent research into the context of the early Roman Empire has shown the extent to which patronage, power, and honour were linked to piety, or at least to displays of piety.¹ This work has assisted biblical scholars who are working to place Paul's writings more solidly in the context of their time.² Such research has also yielded a number of different theories about the historical Jesus,³ and theories about what the "kingdom of heaven" may have meant in light of Jesus' political and religious context.⁴ This scholarship aims to break down the artificial distinctions placed by our culture on the past, to demonstrate that although we are accustomed to drawing a psychological line between the separable realms of politics and religion, it is a mistake to assume that people in the honour-shame culture of the early Empire wanted to make such conscious separations.

It is therefore somewhat surprising that when today's scholars examine the theological

¹ See for instance K.C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

² Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997); J. Paul Sampley, ed., *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International–Continuum, 2003).

³ An excellent one page summary of historical Jesus theories is available on Peter Kirby's *Early Christian Writings* website. Peter Kirby, "Historical Jesus Theories," *Early Christian Writings*, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/theories.html> (accessed 1 Feb. 2010).

⁴ Dennis Duling's article on "Kingdom of God, Kingdom of Heaven" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* is a helpful introduction to relatively recent theories about Jesus' kingdom teachings. Dennis C. Duling, "Kingdom of God, Kingdom of Heaven," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 49-69. For a book length treatment of nine different kingdom models that have been used from the time of Irenaeus onward, Howard Snyder's *Models of the Kingdom* is somewhat more readable than Pelikan's multi-volume history of Christian traditions. Howard A. Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991).

context in which both Jesus and Paul arrived at their respective teachings, a modern “Berlin Wall” goes up around issues of the soul, a wall that draws a modern, if artificial, line around an issue that is believed to be an irrelevant and disposable dualism.

As with the ancient inseparability of politics and religion, it would no doubt come as a surprise to first century theologians, whatever their loyalties, to learn that doctrines of the soul could be thought of as entirely separable from questions of faith, afterlife, redemption, and relationship with God. Doctrines of the soul deeply saturated the religious traditions we know of from that era and the preceding centuries. To establish this point, one need look no further than the elaborate theories about the soul and the afterlife expressed in Egyptian religion (preservation of the body to ensure happiness for the *ba* or *ka*),⁵ in Babylonian belief (human souls originate in the stars and descend to earth to assume bodily form),⁶ in Zoroastrianism (eschatological resurrection is promised for all),⁷ and to a lesser extent in classical Greek poetry (heroes go to Elysium or the Islands of the Blessed; others go to Hades).⁸ The biblical record is not exempt from this intimate interconnection of soul and religion, although many liberal theologians and biblical scholars might like it to be so.⁹ Both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament

⁵ Geddes MacGregor, *Images of Afterlife: Beliefs from Antiquity to Modern Times* (New York: Paragon, 1992), 58-60.

⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Eschatology and Feminism,” in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, 2nd ed., ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engels (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 133.

⁷ MacGregor, *Images of Afterlife*, 61-62.

⁸ R. Drew Griffith, *Mummy Wheat: Egyptian Influence on the Homeric View of the Afterlife and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008), 1; also Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 197-199.

⁹ Rabbinic Judaism has also shied away from an interpretation of Hebrew texts that would speak unequivocally of the existence of a soul that is separable from the body.

attest to the soul and to an afterlife for the soul,¹⁰ and many of the canonical writings may be seen in an exegetic light as building upon and explicating their followers' presuppositions about such beliefs.

The second Creation story (Gen. 2:4-3:24), placed almost at the beginning of the Torah, must be understood as making a number of crucial thesis statements about the relationship between God and the "essential self" of human beings. Although it is tempting, as Tertullian did, to read certain verses here in isolation, such as the verse that tells us about the creation of Adam from the dust of the earth and from God's breath of life (Gen. 2:7), a careful reading of the second Creation story as a whole reveals a great deal more about the writers' understanding of the soul than simple "dust and breath." There is, for instance, the introduction of the tree of life, the fruit of which *could* confer eternal life on Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:9, 3:3, 3:22) – leading one to the conclusion that immortality isn't entirely off the table – and the problematic relationship between knowledge and suffering, as represented by the tree of knowledge of good and bad (Gen. 2:9, 2:17, 3:5-7, 3:11, 3:17, 3:22). As an example of Wisdom literature, Genesis 2-3 is a clear statement on how human beings are *not* to proceed in the care of the soul (the breath of life) given to us by God. Most of the rest of the Torah could be said to explain in greater detail how human beings can use their soul-given free will to live safely within the laws given to them by God for their protection. Daily praxis is to be the focus of their lives, rather than grandiose preparations for the afterlife.

The intentional near-absence in the Torah of afterlife theology would have spoken eloquently to its audience about Judaism's distinctive claims for the soul. In this religious vision,

¹⁰ For a review of these attestations, see Georg Harder, "ψυχή," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3., rev. ed., ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 676-689.

having a soul is a *good* thing, one that allows a person to live each day with dignity (even though there are consequences for disobedience), not a bad thing that traps a person in frightening mystical journeys of ascent and descent as, for example, in Plato's *Phaedrus*,¹¹ a treatise that was written decades *before* the final redaction of Genesis 2-3, if Russell Gmirkin is correct in his dating of the Torah to 273-272 BCE.¹² Plato's voluble and dualistic assertions about the soul could scarcely be more different from the subtle portrait of the soul presented in Genesis 2-3.

¹¹ In *Phaedrus*, which probably dates from Plato's middle period, he presents a "myth" about the nature of the immortal soul (*Phaedrus* 245c-250c). In this myth, the soul is compared to a winged team of horses and their charioteer. Souls compete to try to ascend to the region above the heavens, the region that is "occupied by being which really is, which is without colour or shape, intangible, observable by the steersman of the soul alone, by intellect, and to which the class of true knowledge relates." If a soul succeeds in gazing upon "what is true," it will be happy, and return to its home in the heavens. But if a soul fails in its required task, the soul will be filled with forgetfulness and incompetence, the weight of which will cause it to lose its wings. It will then fall to earth, where it *must* incarnate according to inviolable provisions of divine law. Plato's primary concern is to establish the justness and truth of divine laws that reinforce the hierarchical social structure which is recommended by Plato, a structure which ought to put philosophers on the very top rung of the ladder because God wants it to be so. Throughout his treatises, Plato calls himself a "lover of wisdom," but he behaves like a prophet. In this paper, I place Plato in the company of prophets who are trying to close the rift between *nomos* and the Divine. Despite the prominence of reason in Plato's early and middle writings, I have placed him in the *nomos*-versus-Divine category of thinkers because he is not using reason to argue for the role of *physis* in helping people solve the problems of human suffering. He is using reason to argue for hope in a future union with the Divine for a small group of elect souls (who in this case happen to be the philosophers). (For Plato's arguments in relation to this theme, see *Phaedo*, 73-83; *The Symposium*, 92-95; *Phaedrus*, 248a-249d). Tertullian would later wholeheartedly embrace Plato's methodology, if not the specific details seen in Plato's law-giving myths about the soul.

¹² Russell E. Gmirkin, *Berosus and Genesis, Manetho and Exodus: Hellenistic Histories and the Date of the Pentateuch* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 245. As Gmirkin points out, the Documentary Hypothesis has so strongly influenced scholarly opinion on the dating of the Torah that few have challenged the assumption that the final redaction took place in the mid to late fifth century (that is, in the post-Exilic period, rather than in the Hellenistic period). Norman Gottwald, for instance, places the final JEPD redaction at c. 400 BCE on his detailed timeline of all the literary units included in the Hebrew Scriptures. Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 104-105. Commentary in *The Jewish Study Bible* places the redaction of the Torah during the Babylonian exile or soon thereafter. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, ed., *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society TANAKH Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6. Gmirkin, however, challenges the methodology used by J. Wellhausen to establish his dates in the Documentary Hypothesis. Gmirkin's own methodology is source criticism, which he uses in a compelling way to show the literary dependence of Genesis 1-11 on a text datable to 278 BCE (Berosus's *Babyloniaca*), and the literary dependence of the Exodus story on a text datable to 285-280 BCE (Manetho's *Aegyptiaca*). Gmirkin, *Berosus and Genesis, Manetho and Exodus*, 1. Gmirkin thus throws the dating scheme of the Documentary Hypothesis into disarray, and opens up new possibilities for understanding the motives of those who presented the Torah in its final form. In particular, a Hellenistic date for the Pentateuch would require us to reassess the response of third century BCE Judaism to Hellenism. If the entire Torah could be viewed as polemic against the wiles of the Hellenistic "snake," it might certainly go a long way towards explaining why the Hebrew canon seems mute on the topic of Alexander and his immediate successors. Perhaps the Torah is not mute on the subject at all.

Whereas the book of Genesis presents an “open system” in which free will is respected, change is possible, and devotion to family is an acceptable path to wisdom, in Plato the doctrine of the soul is emblematic of a “closed system.” The theological claim in Genesis 2-3 about the soul would have been seen as radical – even counter-cultural – at the time it was written. It is still, in some ways, a radical claim.

It is not realistic for us to suppose that Jesus, and later Paul, could have envisioned – or would have *wanted* to envision – a religious “package” that excluded teachings about the soul. Within the religious context of the time, religion without soul would not have been considered religion at all. It would scarcely have qualified as Hellenistic philosophy, since most such schools built their intellectual teachings in part on their distinctive brands of soul doctrine.¹³ For instance, in Plato’s highly influential writings, which would come to influence Christianity so extensively, the soul was the “glue” that held together what Burkert calls “the great synthesis . . . [that was] to become the foundation of both philosophy and religion.”¹⁴

In the early philosophy of nature the idea emerged that the soul is somehow akin to the stars and the sky, while the divine enters into more and more direct relations with the cosmos. The reflections of the sophists made the soul, *psyche*, the centre of feeling, thinking, and decision-making and thus gave empirical, psychological content to this concept. Finally in the great synthesis wrought by Plato the new concept of the soul was able to become the foundation of both philosophy and religion. At the same time, Plato, drawing on and transforming many varied traditions, created those myths of the afterlife that were to exert lasting influence. They are presented in a playful manner, without the arrogance of revelation, but they pointed the way to many an apocalypse. By comparison the earlier poetic texts [about afterlife] faded into almost irrelevant fairy tales.¹⁵

¹³ Burkert’s chapter on “Philosophical Religion” demonstrates how doctrines of the soul were used to bolster the authority of Pre-Socratic thinkers, Plato, Aristotle, Xenocrates, and polis religion in Greece in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 305-337. Harder’s article on the soul summarizes how the soul (*psyche*) was conceived in different schools of classical Greek thought. Harder, “ψυχή,” 676-679.

¹⁴ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 199.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 199.

Since it seems clear that Jesus was not advocating a novel form of atheism¹⁶ – atheism did not oblige its adherents to believe in the soul – we may reasonably conclude that Jesus, like his religious contemporaries, had something important to say about the soul (even though we may not be certain what that was). Thus, it may be worthwhile for us to inquire about Jesus’ own context with regard to doctrines of the soul. What was his understanding of the soul? What language did he use to try to express this understanding to his followers? What way, if any, did his understanding of the soul differ from that of his contemporaries? How did Paul interpret Jesus’ teachings on the soul? How did Tertullian interpret both Paul’s and Jesus’ soul doctrines?

If it can be said that in today’s United Church there is too little language for speaking theologically about the soul, it may also be said that in first century Palestine there was too *much* language. Religious syncretism had resulted in a wide variety of religious options. James Rives, in his chapter on “Religious Options” in the Greco-Roman tradition,¹⁷ outlines the two major attractions (esoteric wisdom and divine inspiration) and the three major advantages (traditional benefits, intensification, and salvation) of influential religious movements such as the Pythagorean cult, the Orphic mysteries, the cult of Isis, the followers of Hermes Trismegistos, the Persian traditions (Zoroastrianism, plus the cult of Mithras that morphed into the Greco-Roman mystery by that name), the Eleusinian mysteries, the “mainstream” tradition (of gods, heroes, daimons, and mortals, plus the new emperor cult), and a “new” dualistic model of the cosmos

¹⁶ Here I am using “atheism” in its modern sense of lack of belief in God, not in the sense in which first century Romans used it to describe the monotheism of the Jews.

¹⁷ Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, 158-181.

attested in Greek philosophers such as Plato.¹⁸

All these religious movements existed contemporaneously in the first century, quite apart from the divergent schools of thought found within Judaism itself. Events arising from the Jewish Revolt of 66-73 CE and the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE seem to have crushed Jewish factions such as the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Zealots (leaving Pharisaic Judaism and early Christianity as the main successors to Judaic teachings), but when Jesus was teaching and healing in Galilee and Judea, these competing Jewish factions still existed, and all of them had their own understandings of the soul and the afterlife.

Josephus recorded the beliefs of the “philosophical sects” of the Jews: the Sadducees taught that souls die with the bodies, the Pharisees taught an eschatological judgment and resurrection of the body for the virtuous, and the Essenes believed in the immortality of a soul imprisoned in a corrupt body.¹⁹ The Gospel of Mark agrees that the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection.²⁰ The community at Qumran – which many scholars believe may have been linked to Josephus’s Essenes – also left behind copies it had collected of Jewish apocalyptic literature, including the Enoch literature, which spoke in terms of evil angels who had procreated with

¹⁸ Burkert shows that Plato’s later cosmology of polarized forces of good and evil – in *The Laws*, one of Plato’s latest works, he introduced an evil world soul eternally battling a good world soul (*The Laws*, 905a-906c) – introduced dualistic tendencies that were in tension with Plato’s monistic views, such as those found in *The Symposium*. “Since then monistic and dualistic tendencies have been competing with each other in Platonism.” Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 328-329.

¹⁹ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, book 18, chap. 2. *The Jewish War*, book 2, chap. 8, gives more detail about the Essenes, including their doctrine of the soul (para. 11). Josephus notes the resemblance of the Essene doctrine to that of the Greeks. Josephus. In *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, rev. ed., trans. William Whiston, comm. Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999).

²⁰ Mark 12:18-27.

human women and thus brought sin into the world.²¹ Jewish apocalyptic written from about 250 BCE to 150 CE, including chapters 7-12 of the canonical book Daniel, spoke of the End Time, when all who have died will be raised, with the righteous receiving everlasting life, and the shameful receiving everlasting punishment.²² Less extreme apocryphal books such as Sirach (second century BCE) and Wisdom of Solomon (late first century BCE to early first century CE) at the very least assumed that body and soul were separable upon death.²³ These different ideas about the soul were not peripheral to the theological claims being made by different religious groups. Claims about the soul were instead *central* to each group's authority, and helped define the groups' theological identities.

What is interesting – and confusing – about first century CE Judaism is that several different groups that each took their inspiration from the Torah could end up fighting a civil war amongst themselves at the same time as the Romans began to take a sterner view of political events in Palestine.²⁴ Devotion to Torah did not unite these groups, despite the obvious external threat posed by the Roman army. We may infer that additional belief systems, additional

²¹ “Introduction to the Enoch Literature,” in Michael Wise, Martin Abegg Jr., and Edward Cook, trans., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (New York: HarperCollins–HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 278-280. Wise *et al* comment in this introduction that “early theologians such as Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria show a knowledge of the legends of Enoch. The early church writer Tertullian regarded the *Book of Enoch* as inspired, although he admitted that ‘it is not received by some.’”

²² Dan. 12:2.

²³ Sir. 38:23, 40:11; Wis. 9:15, 14:26. In Sirach, the writer follows the traditional Hebrew view that the dead go to Sheol, the shadowy abode of all spirits, regardless of merit (Sir. 14:12-19). In Sheol, spirits have little or no contact with God. By contrast, the Hellenistic idea of an eternal life with God for the righteous has crept into Wisdom of Solomon (Wis. 3:1-3, 5:15-16). This promise of eternal life is not eschatological, since it is not specifically linked to the End Times. It is linked only to deservedness, as in Plato. By the time the apocalyptic text of 4 Ezra (contained within 2 Esdras) was written by an anonymous Jew at the end of the first century CE, post-Temple Judaism could speak of clear-cut outcomes for both the righteous (who would be close to God) and the wicked (who would wander in torment) until the End Times (2 Esdras 7:75-104).

²⁴ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, book 20, chap. 8-9; *Jewish War*, book 4, chap. 3.

philosophical, social, or political priorities, had caused the people of the Covenant to split into factions – Pharisee, Sadducee, Essene, Zealot, Ebionite – each of them claiming its adherents were pious observers of Jewish religious law, and all of them ready to stab each other in the back (literally and figuratively) in the tumultuous decade of the 60's.

On the surface, this makes little sense. But if we consider the possibility that some kind of psycho-spiritual disagreement was contributing to the split – if we consider the possibility that in some ways these different factions were not on the same religious “page” as each other, and therefore could not understand each other’s choices – it becomes easier for us to observe the choices each group made, and postulate a partial (though by no means complete) explanation for those choices. The trilemma model I have proposed here is an attempt to show that beneath the pages of scripture lie deeper existential questions, questions that human beings seem driven to ask and answer in ways that are often strikingly divergent from each other. Divergent theories inevitably lead to very different visions of how we should construct society.

As I mentioned above, there are three clusters of thought, one revolving around the rift between *physis* and *nomos*, one around the rift between *nomos* and the Divine, and the last around the rift between *physis* and the Divine. Each of these three rifts is so momentous, so absorbing in its cultural and political implications, that it is easy to see why, over time, groups might drift more and more in the direction of just one of these rifts to the exclusion of the other two. It is easy to see why groups that focussed on the *physis-nomos* rift could become less and less interested in metaphysical questions, such as the nature of the soul, and more and more intent on uncovering the underlying laws of virtuous living and hierarchical society (for instance, the Sadducees). Meanwhile, those drawn to the existential questions around *nomos* and the

Divine would have an unconscious tendency to rationalise instances where prophecy contradicted the laws of nature (*physis*), and give preference to their prophecies at the expense of observable reality (for instance, the apocalyptic sects). Finally, the group with less interest in *nomos*, and greater pursuit of individual transcendence as a natural part of God's creation, could easily become marginalised if they flouted societal norms (*nomos*) (for instance, the Ebionites). These Jewish groups were united in their belief in the one God and in the importance of their scriptures. What the Sadducees, apocalyptic groups, and Ebionites *did* with those beliefs led in very different directions.²⁵

If this model can partially explain some of the religious dissension we know existed in first century Judaism, where, then, would we place Jesus in the trilemma of divergent theological solutions? This question is not easily answered because, to the best of our knowledge, Jesus did not leave a record of his own thoughts, and we are forced to reconstruct his teachings through a series of filters – that is, through the writings of men who were not eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus' life, and who were writing with their own agendas decades after his death. Because each source presents Jesus in its own distinctive way, today's researchers of the historical Jesus cannot even agree on how to understand the man who was Jesus.²⁶

To further complicate matters, York University professor Barrie Wilson has presented a

²⁵ It would not be an exaggeration to say that this pattern was repeated in the early decades of Christianity.

²⁶ An excellent one page summary of the different theories is available on Peter Kirby's *Early Christian Writings* website. Kirby groups recent scholarship on the historical Jesus into nine categories: (1) Jesus the Myth: Heavenly Christ; (2) Jesus the Myth: Man of the Indefinite Past; (3) Jesus the Hellenistic Hero; (4) Jesus the Revolutionary (only Robert Eisenman is included in this category); (5) Jesus the Wisdom Sage (Kirby places John Dominic Crossan, Robert Funk, Burton Mack, and Stephen J. Patterson here); (6) Jesus the Man of the Spirit (Marcus Borg appears in this group); (7) Jesus the Prophet of Social Change (Richard Horsley); (8) Jesus the Apocalyptic Prophet (Bart Ehrman is found here); and (9) Jesus the Savior (Luke Timothy Johnson, Robert H. Stein, and N.T. Wright represent this group). Certainly there is no shortage of different portraits of Jesus!

compelling case in his book *How Jesus Became Christian* for the differences between Paul's Christ Movement (Proto-Orthodoxy) and James' Jesus Movement (the Ebionites) – differences in origins, beliefs, and practices so striking that Wilson concludes that Paul's Christ Movement was a new and different religion operating *in parallel with* the Jesus Movement.²⁷ These two movements, in Wilson's view, were brilliantly cemented together by the author of Luke-Acts. "Acts in clearly inventing history in order to create the desired association,"²⁸ says Wilson, who further shows that Acts of the Apostles "authorizes us to see the New Testament through the eyes of Paul."²⁹

Indeed, in support of Wilson's thesis, it is interesting to go through the mental exercise of trying to forget what one has read about Paul in Acts, and simply let Paul's own words speak for themselves. One struggles to find information about the historical Jesus, quotes from the teaching parables of Jesus that may already have been circulating in an early version of Q, or references to Jesus' role as a healer. Paul is speaking a different language. He is speaking the language of the *nomos*-Divine rift, a language that relies on prophecy (Paul himself was the prophet in this case³⁰), irrevocable contract law (*nomos*), election, and hope in a future salvation. It is the same language spoken many years before by Plato and by Jewish apocalyptic groups, and many years afterward by orthodox Christianity. It is, if nothing else, a *successful* language that tightly binds God and humanity in a relationship of covenant. The problem with this language is

²⁷ Barrie Wilson, *How Jesus Became Christian* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2008), 113.

²⁸ Wilson, *How Jesus Became Christian*, 141.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

³⁰ Paul is insistent on the matter of his own prophetic authority (eg. 1 Thess. 2:4; Gal. 1:15-17, 3:16; 2 Cor. 3:4-6, 12:1-7; 1 Cor. 2:4-13, 9:15-18; Phil. 1:16; Rom. 1:1-6, 9:1, 16:25-27).

that nature's laws (*physis*) have little weight. Evidence derived from the human senses may clash with prophetic claims about the imminent End Times.³¹ In order to preserve the authority of prophecy, it becomes tempting to dismiss the evidence of the human senses, to claim that the witness of the body is inferior to the voice of prophecy. From there, it is a small step to the theological claim of evil bodies that imprison the wise voice of prophecy (that is, the soul, which in Hellenistic thought was thought to be the seat of intelligence and wisdom).³²

This is not to suggest that Paul was insincere in his teachings. It is to suggest that his primary interest lay in trying to close the *nomos*-Divine rift, and that he interpreted previous teachings, including the teachings of Jesus, in light of this philosophical concern. It can be inferred from his own writings, however, that his theological solution to the *nomos*-Divine rift led him inexorably to a darker and darker view of human nature. This is perhaps most evident in his letter to the Romans. Here we can see that he has in some ways given up on the notion that Divine Law (*nomos*) is fair and logical, and has decided to replace it with a doctrine of cosmic sin that can only be redeemed through grace.³³ (This doctrine is a form of election.) Paul further concludes that the only way to make this claim palatable is to shift it into the future through the vehicle of hope³⁴ in a sort of religious Ponzi scheme that shifts attention away from dismal current realities and promises wildly optimistic future returns. Unfortunately, as the history of

³¹ 1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Cor. 15:12-58.

³² Rom. 7:14-25. See also Plato's *Phaedo*, 81, 92.

³³ Rom. 5:12-8:17. It is rarely noted that a doctrine of grace of necessity implies a capricious, transcendent God who inexplicably favours some of his children over others.

³⁴ Rom. 8:18-25.

“crisis cults” has repeatedly shown, these prophetic promises usually come crashing down.³⁵

We are so accustomed in the church to thinking that Paul’s theology accurately reflected Jesus’ theology that we have not, perhaps, paid sufficient attention to the differences between these two teachers.³⁶ A careful examination of the earliest texts outside the Pauline corpus – Q, Mark, and James³⁷ – gives strong evidence for a reading of Jesus as either a *physis-nomos* thinker or a *physis*-Divine thinker, but there is less evidence for an understanding of Jesus as an apocalyptic *nomos*-Divine prophet, despite the presence of the “little apocalypse” in Mark 13, and despite the carefully considered opinion of Bart Ehrman.³⁸ In this paper, I place Jesus within the category of religious thinkers who were concerned with the *physis*-Divine rift.

The *physis*-Divine point of the trilemma is in some ways the most difficult to observe and analyse because its primary focus is relationships, and relationships, as modern psychologists know, are not easily quantified. Relationships involve ambiguity, change, and messy emotions such as love and trust. They typically operate outside the bounds of *nomos* (as many a fretful

³⁵ Michael O. Wise gives a very readable account of charismatic cults from different parts of the world in the opening chapter, “Of Messiahs and Myth-Dreams,” in *The First Messiah: Investigating the Savior Before Jesus* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 1-36.

³⁶ In Bart Ehrman’s history about the battles over early church doctrine, he has a chapter entitled “At Polar Ends of the Spectrum: Early Christian Ebionites and Marcionites.” Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 2003), 95-112. According to Ehrman, the Ebionites did not accept any of Paul’s writings (Ibid., 101). The Marcionites, of course, accepted only Paul and a rewritten version of Luke.

³⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson is one of the strongest and clearest voices advocating that the letter of James be dated to the first Christian generation, perhaps “very close indeed to the formative stage of the Jesus traditions.” Luke Timothy Johnson, *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 38.

³⁸ Ehrman, *Lost Gospel of Jesus*, 149-151; also Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We don’t Know About Them)*, (New York: HarperCollins–HarperOne, 2009), 156-171. In contrast to Ehrman’s understanding of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet, the Jesus Seminar decided that Jesus was non-apocalyptic. Robert W. Funk and Mahlon H. Smith, *The Gospel of Mark: Red Letter Edition*, The Jesus Seminar (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1991), 52, 195.

parent knows) and can encompass both large, enmeshed groups (such as mystery cults) and lone individuals who are seeking deep connection with God (mystics and contemplatives). There is still a place for logic and reason here – *agape* and *nous* are not mutually incompatible, despite Plato’s vigorous efforts to present *eros* as inferior to pure reason³⁹ – but without the firm boundaries of *nomos* to direct people’s behaviour towards socially useful outcomes, the mystic may be tempted to set aside the logic of *physis* in favour of searching for ecstasy.⁴⁰ Once the mystic has set aside the laws of nature – the laws that require us to care for our bodies – he or she becomes vulnerable to various physical and mental illnesses, as such illnesses are understood today by western medicine. However, the mystic who successfully closes the rift between *physis* and the Divine by honouring the laws of nature, and seeing those laws as the self-revelation of a loving, immanent God, spends less time battling his/her own addictions or illnesses, and therefore has more time to live a life of service to others.⁴¹

This is the minority religious solution, to be sure. It is a solution that obligates individuals to engage in a *present* relationship with God, rather than an eschatological one, and it

³⁹ The role of love as merely an intermediate step in the soul’s journey of ascent, rather than the soul’s highest aspiration, is discussed in the dialogue between Socrates and Diotima in *The Symposium*, 79-96. In Plato’s *Symposium*, love is only a stepping-stone that allows people to yearn for the absolute beauty and true goodness that is God. However, only by leaving love behind and embracing pure reason can souls experience constant union with the Divine (monism), and “have the privilege of being beloved of God” (*The Symposium*, 95). Plato suggests that philosophers can potentiate this rare feat if they constantly deny the pleasures of the body, and turn all their will towards freeing the soul (that is, the mind) from the corrupting influence of everything that is not pure reason (*Phaedo*, 77-81). Tertullian will make similar recommendations for ascetic restraint in his Montanist-Christian writings.

⁴⁰ There is a long and unfortunate history of “mystic hopefuls” turning to psychotropic substances and dangerous ritual practices in an attempt to achieve a state of spiritual ecstasy. A distressing lack of solid research on the links between mystical practice and acquired illness continues to impede an understanding of this issue. Much of the evidence that exists is anecdotal.

⁴¹ Karen Armstrong, who wrote a narrative account of her unhappy life as a young nun and the harrowing effects of undiagnosed epilepsy on her spiritual journey, is a modern-day example of a *physis*-Divine mystic who has managed to successfully close the gap. Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2004).

is a solution that obligates the church to continually reevaluate its understanding of God's self-revelation as new scientific discoveries (*physis*) emerge. In this theological understanding, *nomos* must give way to *physis* where an obvious contradiction exists, not the other way around. The consequence of this approach is that church authority, as it has long been envisioned, is significantly undermined, and this is rarely popular.⁴² However, it would not be the first time in the history of the movement founded by Jesus that religious authority (*nomos*) was forced to make room for *physis*. It is Jesus himself who may have taught a theological solution that was even more radical and more holistic than previously thought – a solution based on the *physis*-Divine rift.

The Gospel of Mark, excepting chapter 13, attests to Jesus' novel theological solution in a number of ways. As part of Mark's strategy to help people open their eyes and their ears to the message of faith taught by Jesus (Mark 8:14-21; 10:51-52), Mark continually subverts commonly held expectations of how a Messiah should speak and behave. Devout people who have listened to the religious scrolls many times in their lives are accustomed to hearing promises of peace, hope, love, joy, freedom, glory, righteousness, holiness, and wisdom. Matthew, Luke, and John continue this tradition of sprinkling their texts with words of theological promise. Yet Mark uses such words sparingly, and in some cases not at all, as a concordance quickly shows: "peace" is used only three times; "hope" zero times; "love" four times; "joy" one time; "freedom" zero times;

⁴² The tragedy here is that as orthodox Christianity struggles to maintain the preeminence of *nomos*, it is losing out on the opportunity to shift church leadership into the *physis*-Divine domain, to help close the massive rift that now exists between religion and science, and to help answer the spiritual needs of the many Canadians who are forming their own house churches rather than attend formal religious institutions. A Statistics Canada report, published in 2006, states, "While only about one-third (32%) of adult Canadians attend religious services at least monthly, over one half (53%) engage in religious activities on their own at least monthly." The report was compiled from 2002 data by Warren Clark and Grant Schellenberg, "Who's Religious?" in Canadian Social Trends (Statistics Canada – Catalogue no. 11-008: Summer 2006).

“glory” three times; “just/righteous” three times; “holy” seven times; and “wisdom” only once. Surprisingly, the noun *nomos* does not appear at all Mark. (By comparison, *nomos* appears 119 times in Paul, including 72 occurrences in Romans, and 32 occurrences in Galatians.⁴³) A possible explanation is that Mark, perhaps following Jesus, saw the difficulty in using words that mean something very different to a person at the top of the honour-shame social pyramid than to a person at the bottom. (How meaningful are the words “peace” and “justice” to a slave, an impoverished widow, or a disabled child?) As such, Jesus’ teachings as shown in Mark would tie in with the minority voice of Hebrew scripture that speaks of male and female being created equally in God’s image (Gen. 1:27), and of Israel’s duty in the Covenant Code to care for slaves, foreigners, widows, orphans, and the poor (Exod. 22:20-26; 23:6,9,11).

From the gospel’s earliest verses, Mark struggles to present Jesus in an unusual perspective compared to the heroes found in other Greco-Roman biographies.⁴⁴ There is no family history at the beginning. There are no claims for a miraculous birth or a wonder-filled childhood. Jesus’s family and hometown don’t even *like* him (Mark 3:21, 31-35; 6:1-4). Despite this demonstrated lack of status and honour, Mark’s Jesus is undeterred in either his relationship with God or his commitment to serving as a healer of the sick, regardless of a sick person’s status or state of purity (this last in itself sets him apart from priestly Jewish *nomos*).

⁴³ Esser, “Law, Custom, Elements,” 442.

⁴⁴ Hanson and Oakman remark in *Palestine in the Time of Jesus* that, in the context of a first century CE Mediterranean honour-shame culture, “the maintenance of honor – for one’s self, one’s family, and one’s larger groups – is absolutely vital to life.” Hanson and Oakman, 6. Despite this entrenched social reality, Mark refuses to spend any time describing either ascribed honour for Jesus (eg. his genealogy) or acquired honour for Jesus (eg. acclaim bestowed upon him by high ranking officials). Indeed, one can infer that Mark is actually attacking the traditional concept of honour acquired through religious affiliation. Such an attack would have been seen by many at the time as counter-cultural, perhaps even subversive. In contrast, the authors of both Matthew and Luke carefully show that Jesus lays claim to an impeccable bloodline (that is, that Jesus has unassailable ascribed honour).

The reader slowly begins to get the idea that Jesus could have just about anything he wants from the grateful people around him, but he insists on choosing a life of low status and devoted service. Again and again Jesus sets the priorities of healing (*physis*) above the priorities of law and the rewards of status (Mark 2:17; 2:23-28; 3:1-6; 7:1-13). He is always talking about God and the importance of relationship with God, but, for such a pious man, his choices are downright confusing. He is self-effacing. He does not live as an ascetic. He does not withdraw from sinners into a sectarian community such as that at Qumran.⁴⁵ He does not constantly preach righteousness; on the contrary, he preaches egalitarian compassion and forgiveness for *everyone*, not just for Jews (Mark 5:1-20; 7:24-30; 11:25). And he thinks healing combined with simple, non-ritualistic faith is an integral part of our relationship with the Divine. If one did not know better, one might imagine him as a founding inspiration for Doctors Without Borders.

According to Mark's Jesus, sickness and healing are related to *physis*, not to divine punishment and reward. In a *physis*-Divine paradigm, the human mind (*nous*) is perhaps incapable of grasping all the underlying scientific laws at work in the mysterious process of healing, but this humble attitude is no obstacle to a simple faith in a caring, immanent God who is as close as the nearest jar of medicinal salve (or the nearest basket of fishes and loaves). Put another way, healing is a blend of the laws of nature and the inscrutable faith of the heart. Mark

⁴⁵ Michael Wise is an acclaimed Dead Sea Scrolls scholar whose book *The First Messiah* shows that the Teacher of Righteousness described in the Qumran scrolls was in fact a man named Judah, an elite scholar and member of the Jerusalem priesthood, who, about a hundred years before Jesus' ministry, became a millenarian prophet, and was perhaps the first to lay claim to the title of Jewish messiah. According to Wise, Judah himself wrote a large body of material, including at least nine hymns and a "New Covenant" that emphasized separation of the pure and holy from the impure and profane. These laws required community members to live apart from "the Children of Hell." Wise, *The First Messiah*, 42-43. Judah's teachings exemplify the theological solutions favoured in *nomos*-Divine rift: prophecy, election, salvation for the righteous, ongoing battles against Satan, a future Judgment Day. By comparing and contrasting Judah's ministry with that of Jesus, we can learn a great deal about the ways in which Jesus' behaviour did *not* exemplify the behaviour of a sectarian Jewish apocalyptic prophet.

tries to convey this to his audience through his portrait of Jesus as a man of faith *and* of science, not as a man of faith who is *opposed* to science. To reinforce this radical theme, Mark shows that there were limits to Jesus' ability as a healer. Jairus' daughter is not raised from the dead because she was only sleeping (Mark 5: 35-43). Jesus cannot even save himself from the Cross. (Both of these claims would have seemed counter-intuitive in a Greco-Roman context that lauded supernatural abilities.) Even afterwards, at the tomb, Mark 16:1-8 does not attempt to describe anything more than could be observed by the senses: Jesus is not in the tomb, a "young man" in white speaks to the women, and the women flee in terror. Mark's claims are restrained, almost minimalist, reminiscent of cautious scientific observation that reports only what it sees, even if the scientific explanation is still years away.⁴⁶

According to Mark, Jesus was not only a healer and a scholar versed in Torah (Mark 1:21; 6:1-4; 12:35-37), but he was also a man who believed in the soul. Mark 12 is especially clear on this matter. In Mark 12:24-27, Jesus responds to the Sadducees who have tried to entrap him on the question of resurrection of the dead. His response is that their question cannot be answered because the assumptions behind it are wrong. Although he addresses only the Sadducees in this *chreia*, his answer implies that both the Pharisees (who taught a future bodily resurrection) and the Sadducees (who taught that the soul dies with the body) are wrong. In order to "[give] to God the things that are God's" (12:17), one must certainly know the scriptures

⁴⁶ It is helpful to note that careful scientific observation was not new in the first century CE. In the latter part of the fifth century BCE, the physicians of Kos (most famously Hippocrates) were making bold claims about the secular nature of disease, and the importance of applying experimental observation and experience to the practice of medicine. Here, in the psychologically crucial area of healing, Greek physicians were daring to detach the science of healing (*physis*) from the traditions of religion (*nomos*). In about 300 BCE, the Hippocratic school of medicine assembled some seventy written works into a corpus that would achieve "extraordinary influence during late antiquity and the Middle Ages." Marshall Clagett, *Greek Science in Antiquity* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1994), 39.

(12:24), but knowing the scriptures (and the law, *nomos*) is not enough. One must also have faith in the power of God. One must believe that God is *not* the God of the dead, but the God of the living – that is, of living souls, who after death become “*like angels in heaven*” (12:25). For Jesus, those who have died can still be called ζώντων – the living ones. They are not “dead” in the traditional Hebrew understanding of “shades” that wander around in Sheol. Instead, Jesus is speaking of a present (and pleasant) afterlife, an afterlife in which the patriarchs who have died (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), as opposed to having being “taken up” in ascension (Enoch, Elijah), are already with God (12:26). The dead family patriarchs, none of whom had exactly lived blemish-free lives, are not waiting for the End-Times in order to be with God – they are already there. In other words, Jesus is rejecting an eschatological interpretation of Hebrew scripture. On the other hand, he is not, like the Sadducees, going in the opposite direction and rejecting outright the idea that the soul continues to live beyond death (what could be called the materialist view). Jesus has a different doctrine – a non-Platonic, non-apocalyptic, non-materialist, *uplifting* view of God and the soul. Amazingly, Jesus’ God of love and forgiveness has the power to extend his gifts of love and forgiveness to the *dead* – a novel theological solution that dares to reject entrenched Hellenistic and Judaic assertions that the dead *must* be judged by God in the future according to immutable laws that even God is required to obey (*nomos*).⁴⁷

Related to this passage in Mark is the kingdom parable about the labourers in the

⁴⁷ According to Esser, “[i]n the Judaism of the last two centuries B.C. and at the time of Jesus *nomos* was used in an absolute sense: the law was an absolute in itself and was independent of the covenant . . . the law had assumed a dominant role as mediator between God and man, and had become personified as an intermediary with a hypostasis of its own . . . In Hellenistic Judaism especially, the law came to stand alongside wisdom, which had likewise come to be seen as having a hypostasis.” Esser, “Law, Custom, Elements,” 441-442. It should be stated that this personification of the law was not new: Plato had established such an understanding in his Socratic dialogues. Plato, *Crito*, 63-68.

vineyard that is unique to Matthew (Matt. 20:1-16). This parable is often understood to be a challenge to views about just reward (*nomos*), but it can also be understood as a lesson on the radical equality of God's forgiveness. God gives everyone an identical wage of forgiveness, regardless of how long one has laboured in the fields of piety and virtue. This is what the kingdom of heaven is like, according to Jesus, and it is as far from the claims of eschatological *nomos* as it is possible to get. Jesus' anti-Judgment doctrine of the soul is not only radical, but also dangerous to the interests of the religious and political elite.

Mark's Jesus provides no detailed mythology around this understanding of a soul that continues to live beyond death in the company of God.⁴⁸ For instance, we have no idea what actually happened at the tomb. (As mentioned above, such understated theological claims would have been considered unusual at the time, especially in comparison to apocalyptic literature.) But of one thing we are certain: Jesus preaches an uplifting, holistic doctrine of the soul. The teaching *chreia* of Mark 12:28-34, written in this author's economical style, plainly shows that Jesus places relationships with God, each other, and self ahead of the priorities of *nomos*. Furthermore, in contrast to the later assertion by the author of Matthew that Jesus is not here to alter one iota of the law (Matt. 5:17-20), Mark's Jesus shows a clear willingness to challenge the law's inviolability. This is nowhere more obvious than in Mark 12:29, where Jesus adds an important phrase to the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4, and also in Mark 12:33, where he dares to alter the meaning of the *Shema*.

According to the Jewish Study Bible, the prayer known as the *Shema* "rose to special

⁴⁸ Readers of Mark may wish he were less terse and more forthcoming in the details of Jesus' teachings, but in light of the fractious political situation of the 60's, when this gospel was written, it is a testament to Mark's courage that he wrote as bluntly as he did.

prominence both in the synagogue liturgy and in individual piety [in the late Second Temple period].”⁴⁹ The *Shema* commands the people of Israel to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” The Hebrew verb *'ahab*, which is translated in English as “love,” conveys a sense of love as a *duty* that is owed to God.⁵⁰ As the Jewish Study Bible commentary emphasizes, modern readers tend to read the *Shema* through our own hermeneutical lenses:

Modern readers regard the Shema as an assertion of monotheism, a view that is anachronistic. In the context of ancient Israelite religion, it served as a public proclamation of exclusive loyalty to YHVH as the sole LORD of Israel. Subsequently, as the Shema became incorporated into the synagogue liturgy, its recitation was also given legal significance. The prayer was regarded as a legally binding oath to carry out the requirements of the Torah. Through the liturgical recitation of the Shema the worshipper thus reenacts, twice daily, the original covenant ratification ceremony⁵¹

Meanwhile, in the gospel of Mark, Jesus says that the greatest commandment is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, *and with all your mind*, and with all your strength.” He has added an extra clause: “and with all your mind.”

To imagine the effect of this change on Jesus’ Second-Temple audience, one need only contemplate the outrage that would arise if a minister of the church were to add to or take away from the Lord’s Prayer. In first century Galilee and Judah, the intentional addition to the *Shema* would not have gone unnoticed, nor would the explicit clarification of Jesus’ interpretation of it have gone unnoticed: “Then the scribe said to him, ‘You are right, Teacher; you have truly said “he is one, and besides him there is no other”’; and “to love him with all the heart, and with all the

⁴⁹ Berlin and Brettler, ed., *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society TANAKH Translation*, 379n.

⁵⁰ Katharine D. Sakenfeld, “Love in the Old Testament,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 376.

⁵¹ Jewish Study Bible, 380n.

understanding, and with all the strength,” and “to love one’s neighbor as oneself,” – this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices’ (Mark 12:32-33). Jesus, a scholar of Torah, has turned the *Shema* on its head, and has made *agape* (filial affection)⁵² – not legal duty towards God – the chief virtue one should pursue if one wishes to enter the kingdom of God.⁵³

Furthermore, Jesus insists that in order for one to enter the mysterious “kingdom of God,” the path is very simple, and is open to anyone (even to Temple scribes!). God’s people are called to live a life of *balance* so they can experience a relationship of *agape* with God. They must integrate their emotions (*kardias* or heart), their spiritual aspect (*psyche* or soul), their intellect and understanding (*dianoias* or mind), and their strength (*ischys* or strength, courage, ability). People must not follow the teachings of those who insist that the only way for them to know God is for them to fracture themselves into dualistic categories of good soul versus evil body (as in Platonic and Essene thought), or pure reason versus corrupting emotion (as in Platonic thought), or pure ecstasy versus reality (as in mystery cult teachings), or “elect” people versus non-elect people (as in mainstream Judaism), or tainted will versus divine grace (as in apocalyptic thought). Dualistic solutions do not work, says Jesus. God gives everyone a heart, a soul, a mind, and courage.⁵⁴ Somehow these four interrelated aspects of human nature can be

⁵² The Greek *agapaō* had strong connotations of affection, fondness, and simple contentedness. William Klassen, “Love in the New Testament and Early Jewish Literature,” in *The AnchorBible Dictionary*, vol. 4, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 381.

⁵³ When Jesus says to the scribe “You are not far from the kingdom of God,” the verb is in the present tense (Mark 12:34). This is one of several instances in the Synoptics where the Kingdom is described in the present tense, not, as one would expect in apocalyptic thought, the future tense.

⁵⁴ This is a more complex view of human nature than that expressed in the second Creation story of Genesis 2-3. As well, there is no distinction between males and females in Jesus’ understanding of how God creates human beings, and there is no option for blaming “evil forces” such as wily snakes (Hellenism?) or Belial or cosmic sin for one’s own mistakes.

intertwined in a holistic way that creates *agape*, that most puzzling and wondrous of human emotions. To enter the kingdom of God in the present – to be in relationship with God while you are still living as a human being – you must not see yourself as a miniature honour-shame pyramid. Despite what others have claimed, you must not rank mind ahead of heart. You must not rank soul ahead of body. You must use your courage, your ability, to live a life that embodies respect and trust in a God who lovingly gives everyone the intertwined attributes of heart, soul, mind, and strength.⁵⁵ The good news is that, if you do this, you will know love. The bad news is that you will have to let go of your pursuit of honour and status (Mark 12:38-44). To render unto Caesar what is Caesar's is the choice to pursue status. To render unto God what is God's is the choice to pursue *agape*. Only one of these two choices will open the famously narrow gate to the kingdom of heaven (Mark 10: 24-25). Only one of these two choices is founded on Jesus' personal understanding of the soul.

Jesus taught a unique theological vision based on questions that arose from the *physis*-Divine rift. He rejected the widely held Judaic and Hellenistic view that God was, of necessity, transcendent, unchanging, unemotional, and partial towards certain people. He rejected the dualistic theological solutions of the *nomos* versus Divine thinkers, and he rejected the primary concerns of the *physis* versus *nomos* thinkers, with their imbalanced emphasis on reason and their tendency to justify hierarchical authority. He was not opposed to reason or hope if they

⁵⁵ It is useful to note that heart, soul, mind, and strength are all invisible attributes. Although we cannot “see” any of them with our physical senses, there is no denying that they exist, and there is no denying the extent to which they shape our human lives. Only in recent years has the advanced research of neurophysiologists been able to pinpoint some of the places in the central nervous system where these “invisible attributes” – including the soul – may be seated. For a book length treatment of peer-reviewed research on the existence of the soul, see Mario Beauregard and Denyse O’Leary, *The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist’s Case for the Existence of the Soul* (New York: HarperCollins–HarperOne, 2007).) It is interesting that Jesus does not try to explain in what way heart, soul, mind, and strength are interconnected, except through the choice to love. This may be a case where spiritual wisdom exceeds any knowledge that pure science can offer.

served the primary goal of *agape*, but for him the teachings of Judaism had lost sight of the emphasis placed in its earliest laws on relationships and human dignity. In order to help bring about reform, Jesus brazenly spoke the truth as he saw it. He must surely have enraged almost everyone – Jews, Romans, and others – with his willingness to put *nomos* in second place behind *physis* and God. It is little wonder that even his family did not like him.

As scholars such as Bart Ehrman and Barrie Wilson have shown, the small fishing boat that Jesus determinedly set against the tide of *nomos* was soon pushed far off course by the equally determined founder of the new Christ Movement, Paul. Yet the final hijacking of the boat by those who believed in the Proto-Orthodox position did not come right away. It would take considerable time and effort on the part of early church leaders to re-cement *nomos* into the cosmological order of things.

Tertullian, as I will show in the final chapter, skilfully reinterpreted scripture, apocalyptic thought, and Hellenistic philosophy to create a distinctive Christian cosmology based firmly on *nomos*. However, in order for his theology to make sense to his audience, he needed a glue to hold it together.

For Tertullian, as with Plato, that glue was a doctrine of the soul.

CHAPTER THREE

Paul, founder of the Christ Movement, and his Proto-Orthodox successors, such as Irenaeus and Tertullian, understood one thing clearly: a saviour figure is not needed unless people first believe they need to be saved. In civilian life, people phone the fire department when they know their house is on fire. In religious life, people turn to a Christ saviour to mediate and advocate for them when they believe their soul is endangered. Christology and soul doctrines are inextricably linked in Christianity because orthodox Christology is founded on our early understandings of the soul. There is no urgent need for a Christ saviour in the story of humanity's relationship with God unless people first believe they have a soul that is immortal, that will be judged, and that may face eternal punishment. This is not to say that religion cannot exist without a doctrine of the soul – witness orthodox Rabbinic Judaism and the spiritual path of Zen Buddhism. Neither of these two faith traditions teaches the existence of an immortal soul. On the other hand, neither of these faiths teaches a divine Saviour figure whose role it is to bring about individual salvation.

Before examining Tertullian's doctrine in more detail, it is useful to review the doctrines of creation and the doctrines of original justice and sin as they have long been preached in Western orthodoxy. These doctrines, which are still accepted by both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, are helpfully categorized and summarized by editors J. Neuner and J. Dupuis in their book *The Christian Faith: In the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*.¹ The main doctrinal points concerned with "man and his world" are the following:

¹ J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, ed., *The Christian Faith: In the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, rev. ed. (London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1982). I have placed certain words in bold to highlight their presence in current orthodox doctrine.

God created the whole world, spiritual and material; the world is distinct from God; God created the world in freedom, and not from eternity; to manifest His goodness; for His glory; God guides the world through His providence; all created things are good; the created world has its own ‘autonomy’; Man is created by God, **in body and soul**, as the crown of creation; as God’s image; with a unique dignity; and inviolable rights; he is created free; the human **soul** is created by God; it **does not pre-exist** before conception; it is not begotten by the parents; it is individual and **immortal**; it is the ‘form’ of the body; there is one human race; man is a person in society; each man is related to Christ and the Church; Man is destined to master nature through his work.²

Catholic documents that have dealt with “original justice and sin” over the centuries contain these major doctrinal points:

The first man was endowed with the life of grace; he was free from death and concupiscence; these gifts were not due to man; Adam lost the supernatural gifts through his sin; his sin and its fruits are **transmitted to his offspring**; original sin differs from actual sin by the absence of personal consent; it consists in the **loss of grace**; it **brings death** with it; it is the source of concupiscence which weakens man; it **does not destroy freedom**; original sin is wiped out by baptism.³

When these two major branches of orthodox doctrine are read together, as they surely must be, what emerges is an unresolvable tension between these two views of humankind. In the first branch of thought, doctrines dealing with “man and his world,” we see a non-dualistic portrait of good human beings who have an intertwined body and soul, with the soul portion somehow surviving death. There is not a lone, original human soul that has been passed from Adam to all generations (as in Tertullian). Each human being is an individual made in the image of God, with an individual body and an individual immortal soul, yet all human beings belong to only one race, and all human beings have a role to play in society. This sounds quite similar to the doctrine of the soul expressed by Mark’s Jesus, and is basically optimistic, if undeservedly anthropocentric.

² Neuner and Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, 116-117.

³ *Ibid.*, 134.

In contrast, the doctrines of “original justice and sin” tell a very different story about humanity’s relationship with God. Here we have a dismal, dualistic portrait of sin as a potent cosmological force that *must* be passed from parents to children, and can only be remitted by the grace of Jesus Christ in baptism. Humans beings still have free will, but it does not do them much good: they are all like Sisyphus, pushing the rock uphill everyday, only to watch the rock roll down again. They all know their souls are tainted. “Original justice” (*nomos*) trumps the goodness of creation. Even if the observations and advances of science (*physis*) produce balanced, reasonable, alternative explanations for the presence of evil in society,⁴ the finality of this doctrine discourages people from listening for God’s continuing self-revelation through science. Only grace – not relationship, not *agape*, and definitely not forgiveness (which is the antithesis of grace) – can save people from the mire. This is Paul’s theology of grace, a theology that makes no sense without the foundational planks of Platonic and apocalyptic thought, because it is a theology that offers hope to people who fear for their souls in a future Judgment.

Paul uses the word *psyche* only a few times, but he clearly envisions some aspect of the person that survives death and can be saved by Christ, perhaps packaged with bodily resurrection (1 Thess.4;1 Cor. 15), perhaps not (bodily resurrection is not claimed in Galatians or 2 Corinthians). If Paul had not started with suppositions about the soul and the afterlife, his theology would have made little sense, as his promises to the faithful depended on an eventual eternal life for them with God and Christ in heaven (similar to the promises made for Plato’s philosophers, and for apocalyptic’s elect). An important difference between Paul and Plato is

⁴ Recent advances in psychology, psychiatry, neuroscience, and related fields have provided important new models for discussing the question of evil. Anyone who has seen the ameliorative effects of olanzapine (an atypical antipsychotic medication) on the thinking and behaviour of a person suffering from psychotic depression or schizophrenia may be tempted to use the term “miracle.”

that the former portrays the body in less starkly dualistic terms, yet Paul is still happy to suggest that in the tripartite understanding of human beings – spirit, soul, and body – spirit is the highest aspect (1 Thess. 5:23), and later he goes so far as to proclaim in 1 Corinthians that man cannot take any credit for the higher spiritual power that enlightens him since it is entirely a gift of God (1 Cor. 2:14, 3:7, 12:4-11). Grace therefore supercedes the innate reason and pre-existent knowledge that were part of Plato's doctrine of the soul. Paul's theology of grace proved in the end to surpass even Plato's theories as a successful theological solution with which to close the rift between *nomos* and the Divine.

Tertullian, whose writings can easily overwhelm readers with their length, repetitiveness, and polemic tone, becomes easier to understand once the threads of his Christian apologetics are sorted using the trilemma model. An excellent starting place for this exercise is Tertullian's six-chapter treatise, *The Soul's Testimony*. *The Soul's Testimony* refers to his *Apology*, the latter of which is probably dated to the last decade of the second century,⁵ and it has been suggested that *The Soul's Testimony* was written soon afterward as a companion piece to the *Apology*.⁶ In this short treatise, Tertullian calls forth the soul as a witness in an imaginary legal proceeding between Christians and non-Christians. This soul – recall that for Tertullian there is really only one soul shared amongst all humans – is an unimpeachable character witness, even though it never speaks a word. It is Tertullian himself, as advocate and self-proclaimed interpreter, who does the talking. What he says about the soul does not draw on specific Hebrew or New Testament scriptural passages, although he makes some biblical references when speaking of

⁵ Robert D. Sider, ed., *Christian and Pagan in the Roman Empire: The Witness of Tertullian* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

scripture's preeminence. Instead, he talks about the soul by weaving together strands from Hellenistic, Wisdom, and apocalyptic doctrines of the soul, and presenting them as proven truth.

Twentieth century commentators on Tertullian inferred from his legalistic arguments in these writings and others that Tertullian had been educated as a lawyer.⁷ Although this has been questioned,⁸ it is nonetheless clear that Tertullian had been well trained in classical rhetoric. His frequent and accurate references to the teachings of pagan philosophers demonstrate he had likely read these works, perhaps before he converted to Christianity. Many scholars have noted his debt to Stoicism,⁹ which influenced his concrete, materialistic outlook and his attraction to asceticism.

Stoic elevation of logic and reason are certainly evident in *The Soul's Testimony*, but so is a pervasive dualistic cosmology that envisions God's goodness striving constantly against demonic forces:

In expressing vexation, contempt, or abhorrence, thou hast Satan constantly upon the lips; the very same we hold to be the angel of evil, the source of error, the corrupter of the whole world, by whom in the beginning man was entrapped into breaking the commandment of God. And (the man) being given over to death on account of his sin, the entire human race, tainted in their descent from him, were made a channel for transmitting his condemnation.¹⁰

As mentioned earlier, this good-versus-evil dualism is seen in Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Laws*, in Jewish apocalyptic, in some of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and in milder form in Paul. This dualistic cosmology is not Stoic, and, as discussed in Chapter Two, it is not the cosmology

⁷ González, *From the Beginnings*, 171.

⁸ Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 22-29.

⁹ González, *From the Beginnings*, 183; Sider, *Christian and Pagan*, xiii; Barnes, *Tertullian*, 2.

¹⁰ *The Soul's Testimony*, chap. 3, 6.

expressed for the most part by Mark's Jesus. It is also not Gnostic.¹¹ Yet it is a cosmology that prefers myth to science as a means of explaining human suffering. It is a cosmology that places the human soul at centre stage in the cosmic battle it claims is being waged. It is also a cosmology which has become deeply imprinted upon Western thought and culture, as centuries worth of literature and church art will attest.

According to this understanding, God gives the soul *nomos* to aid in the battle between good and evil, and God requires the soul to obey. If the soul does not, it will be punished, because *nomos* demands it. Even God is required to obey this cosmic law, although the tension between this line of reasoning and Paul's doctrine of grace will continue to be a problem for orthodox theologians for centuries.¹² Tertullian uses the term *regula fidei* in his writings to express his understanding of *nomos*. The *regula fidei* encompasses not only the scriptures, but also the teaching authority of the apostles (apostolic succession), and the doctrinal authority of the church.¹³ The *regula fidei* (what might be called Proto-Orthodox *nomos*) trumps scripture, and scripture must be interpreted in light of the *regula fidei*, not the other way around, according to Tertullian.¹⁴

¹¹ Bart Ehrman suggests that Jewish apocalypticism arose as a response to failed Hebrew prophecy, and that Gnosticism, with its carefully elaborated myth of creation, was itself a "radical rethinking of apocalyptic theology," with some forms of Gnosticism originating as "a Jewish reaction against an apocalyptic vision that never materialized." Ehrman, *Lost Gospel of Judas*, 119. Although various Christian Gnostic heresies were crushed, core aspects of apocalyptic dualism have been preserved within Christian orthodoxy: good versus evil, angels versus demons, life versus death, evil present age versus future triumphant age.

¹² A distinct feature of Proto-Orthodox theological solutions for the *nomos*-Divine rift is the Herculean effort made to prove that God cannot break his covenants. Anselm of Canterbury wrestled with the competing claims of *nomos* and grace in the early twelfth century, and arrived at his well known sacrificial theory of Atonement. Urban, *A Short History of Christian Thought*, 117-121. The fact that covenants originate solely through the words of human prophets, and are not usually subject to revision on the basis of God's continuing self-revelation through *physis*, is perhaps grounds for careful reflection in the church today.

¹³ Dunn, "Tertullian's Scriptural Exegesis," 147-148.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

There is no talk in *The Soul's Testimony* of love, forgiveness, or healing, but there is much talk of fear. Although the soul does not seem to fear the future bodily resurrection, which is “a doctrine of the soul,”¹⁵ the soul fears God’s judgment, the soul fears the demons that are everywhere, and the soul fears death (which is God’s judgment).¹⁶ These entrenched human fears – not the witness of scripture! – form the basis of Tertullian’s proof that the soul brings with it innate knowledge, either from itself or from God or from God’s scripture, about these Christian truths.¹⁷ Although souls are not born Christian,¹⁸ human beings throughout the world (even pagans) share these same Christian fears because the soul knows that the Christian teachings about God and Christ are correct.¹⁹ Christians have the whole and complete truth, and the existence of their ancient scriptures proves that Christians had this truth before anyone else, but sometimes bits and pieces of the truth have leaked out into the teachings of non-Christians (such as Greek philosophers) because non-Christians also have souls, and their souls know these truths.²⁰ Even though everyone’s souls are tainted, there is still some goodness – a “light that is

¹⁵ *The Soul's Testimony*, chap. 4.

¹⁶ *The Soul's Testimony*, chap. 2, 4.

¹⁷ *The Soul's Testimony*, chap. 1, 2, 5, 6. Compare to Plato’s epistemology of pre-existent knowledge brought into human life by the soul. Plato, *Meno*, 81c; *Phaedo*, 87, 90-92.

¹⁸ *The Soul's Testimony*, chap. 1, 6.

¹⁹ *The Soul's Testimony*, chap. 5, 6.

²⁰ *The Soul's Testimony*, chap. 5. Here Tertullian claims to be basing his argument on historicity, but it is pure conjecture on his part, since an accurate dating of Hebrew scriptures could not be made then – or perhaps even today, if scholarly disputes are any indication. Says Tertullian, “But, clearly, since the Scriptures of God, whether belonging to Christians or to Jews, into whose olive tree we have been grafted – are much more ancient than any secular literature, (or, let us only say, are of a somewhat earlier date, as we have shown in its proper place when proving their trustworthiness); if the soul have taken these utterances from writings at all, we must believe it has taken them from ours, and not from yours, its instruction coming more naturally from the earlier than the later works.”

in itself” – that cannot be quenched.²¹ Somewhat paradoxically, then, “every soul is a culprit as well as a witness: in the measure that it testifies for truth, the guilt of error lies on it; and on the day of judgment it will stand before the courts of God, without a word to say.”²² Tertullian thus neatly binds together fear, hope, and free will in a theological package of salvation for souls who choose to properly witness to Christian truths, and a guarantee of eternal punishment in hell for those who do not.²³

He manages to do this while referring only once to Christ, and only once to the saviour.

A recent paper by Geoffrey Dunn has examined Tertullian’s hermeneutical principles with regard to scriptural exegesis.²⁴ Such analysis is important because of the inviolable authority placed by Tertullian on scripture (*nomos*), and because of his attempts in other treatises to prove that scripture is “off limits” to non-Christians.²⁵ In his conclusion, Dunn says this:

Thus, even the principles Tertullian enunciated in *de praescriptione haereticorum* about reading the Scriptures in their historical context and about understanding the meaning of words were not absolute ones, but relative to this treatise in particular. They were the ones that would be most effective in combating his current opponents. In a different treatise, he could contradict them if that was what was required for winning his argument against that new opponent.²⁶

Dunn is well aware that such a conclusion makes Tertullian appear to be “an opportunist and a

²¹ *The Soul’s Testimony*, chap. 6..

²² *The Soul’s Testimony*, chap. 6.

²³ As noted above, the necessity of free will, and the consequences of its application, are among the most prominent features of Wisdom literature, including the second Creation story in Genesis 2-3.

²⁴ Geoffrey D. Dunn, “Tertullian’s Scriptural Exegesis in *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 141-155.

²⁵ Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, chap. 15-17.

²⁶ Dunn, “Tertullian’s Scriptural Exegesis,” 155.

person without firm convictions.”²⁷ Dunn, however, is of the opinion that Tertullian was a person of solidly held beliefs who was less concerned with methods than with results. For Tertullian, says Dunn, the intended result was to support the faith in whatever way seemed best.²⁸

Dunn’s defence of Tertullian’s rhetorical relativism – his sometimes favouring literal interpretations of scriptural texts, sometimes allegorical or typological, depending on his purpose at the time – is somewhat difficult to accept, though, especially in light of an intriguing point he raises early in his paper. There he quotes T.P. O’Malley’s observations about the literal reading of Matthew 7:7 in *The Prescription*:

O’Malley observes correctly that this literal reading in *de praescriptione haereticorum* was part of Tertullian’s argument against endless searching (as opposed to actual believing). However, he goes on to say that Tertullian went on to produce stronger arguments to support this, implying something about Tertullian’s belief in the inefficacy of the Scriptures. This is a point he makes on p. 134: “. . . but the rationalism which wishes simple and clear statements finally drives him to take refuge increasingly in non-scriptural norms; in the rule of faith, in tradition, and finally, in the certitude which the Montanist Paraclete offered.”²⁹

Dunn disagrees with O’Malley, and suggests that Tertullian’s purpose in *The Prescription* was to avoid arguing on the basis of scripture so that heretics could not gain a toehold for doing so themselves. I would contend, however, that O’Malley is correct. He has touched on a truth about Tertullian’s theology that is observable not only in *The Prescription*, but also in *The Soul’s Testimony*, and, as I will show below, in *A Treatise on the Soul*. The discernable truth is that Tertullian is not interested in what Jesus had to say about love, forgiveness, healing,

²⁷ Ibid., 155.

²⁸ Ibid., 155.

²⁹ Dunn, “Tertullian’s Scriptural Exegesis,” 150, quoting from T.P. O’Malley, *Tertullian and the Bible: Language-Imagery-Exegesis*, *Latinitas christianorum primaeva* 21 (Nijmegen and Utrecht: Dekker and van de Vegt, 1967).

egalitarianism, or an immanent God. Tertullian's expressed priorities are reason, salvation, original sin, bodily resurrection of the dead, demonic forces, and a transcendent God. In other words, Tertullian is asking the questions asked by earlier thinkers who were trying to close the rift between *nomos* and the Divine. He is asking the same questions that Plato and Paul had previously asked, but he is answering them in ways unique to Proto-Orthodoxy. Perhaps Paul would have appreciated Tertullian's solutions, but it is unlikely that Mark's Jesus would have, because there are so few points of commonality between them.

Tertullian's *Treatise on the Soul* is, like many of his writings, difficult to accurately date, but there is a reference in it to "the true system of prophecy, which has arisen in this present age"³⁰ and to the revelation of the martyr Perpetua,³¹ so this treatise may have been written in the first decade of the third century, at a time when Tertullian's sympathies with Montanism were solidifying.³² Cecil Robeck dates it a few years later, at about 212 CE.³³ The treatise is, in Tertullian's own words, a contest with philosophers about the soul.³⁴ There are references throughout to ideas about the soul from Greek philosophers, especially those of Plato and the Platonists. Tertullian claims he has "looked into Medical Science also, the sister (as they say) of Philosophy, which claims as her function to cure the body, and thereby to have a special

³⁰ Tertullian, *On the Soul*, chap. 2.

³¹ *On the Soul*, chap. 55.

³² Barnes, *Tertullian*, 55.

³³ Cecil M. Robeck, *Prophecy in Carthage: Perpetua, Tertullian, and Cyprian* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1992), 128.

³⁴ *On the Soul*, chap. 3.

acquaintance with the soul.”³⁵ Says Timothy David Barnes, “[t]he size of the *De Anima* and its wealth of erudition fully match the importance of the subject.”³⁶

Tertullian states early in *On the Soul* that the divine doctrine of the soul “spring[s] from Judaea rather than from Greece.”³⁷ His primary scriptural support comes from Genesis 2:7:

. . . as we said at the beginning of the treatise . . . we claimed the soul to be formed by the breathing of God, and not out of matter. We relied even there on the clear direction of the inspired statement which informs us how that “the Lord God breathed on man’s face the breath of life, so that man became a living soul” – by that inspiration of God, of course. On this point, therefore, nothing further need be investigated or advanced by us. It has its own treatise, and its own heretic. I shall regard it as my introduction to the other branches of the subject.³⁸

Genesis 2:7 – a single verse which, on its own, does not give us much information – is co-opted by Tertullian to serve as the scriptural authority for all subsequent points in his doctrine.

Strangely, he asserts that this verse needs no further investigation, yet he offers fifty-five chapters of additional clarification. Tertullian often argues with Plato in this treatise, and he includes a number of references from Genesis, Matthew, Luke, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, and Revelation to support his case. However, he turns only a few times to Mark, and makes no effort to introduce Jesus’ understanding of the soul and God as it is presented in this early gospel.³⁹

³⁵ *On the Soul*, chap. 2. The Stoic physician Soranus of Ephesus, who wrote during the reign of Hadrian (117-138 CE), was the source of the medical material used in *On the Soul* (Barnes, *Tertullian*, 29). In addition to writing gynecological treatises, Soranus composed four treatises on the soul (Ibid., 123).

³⁶ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 123.

³⁷ *On the Soul*, chap. 3.

³⁸ *On the Soul*, chap. 3.

³⁹ As we might expect based on Tertullian’s apocalyptic sympathies, he interprets the Markan passages about demons and exorcisms in a purely cosmological light. For instance, in a discussion about demon possession in chapter 25, Tertullian refers to the seven demons of Mary Magdalene in the long ending of Mark (Mark 16:9), and to “a legion in number, as in the Gadarene [sic].” (There is some confusion here, since Mark 5:1-13 and Luke 8:26-39 speak of one Gerasene afflicted with a demon or demons named Legion, while Matthew speaks of two Gadarene men

A Treatise on the Soul informs us in detail about the nature of the soul and its relationship to the body. Chapter 22 offers a short recapitulation of the early portions of Tertullian's thesis (emphasis added):

Hermogenes has already heard from us what are the other natural faculties of the soul, as well as their vindication and proof; whence it may be seen that the soul is rather the offspring of God than of matter. The names of these faculties shall here be simply repeated, that they may not seem to be forgotten and passed out of sight. We have assigned, then, to the soul both that **freedom of the will** which we just now mentioned, and its **dominion** over the works of nature, and its occasional gift of **divination**, independently of that endowment of **prophecy** which accrues to it expressly from the **grace of God**. We shall therefore now quit this subject of the soul's disposition, in order to set out fully in order its various qualities. The soul, then, we define to be sprung from the breath of God, **immortal, possessing body**, having form, simple in its substance, **intelligent** in its own nature, developing its power in various ways, free in its determinations, subject to be changes of accident, in its faculties **mutable, rational, supreme**, endued with an instinct of presentiment, **evolved out of one (archetypal soul)**. It remains for us now to consider how it is developed out of this one original source; in other words, whence, and when, and how it is produced.⁴⁰

Overall, his doctrine of the soul contains the following major points. The soul is *not* pre-existent⁴¹ (Plato claimed that it is), but the soul is definitely immortal⁴² (a claim also made by Plato). There is no transmigration of the soul.⁴³ (Plato, following Pythagorus, taught

who are troubled by unnamed demons). It is not at all certain, however, that Mark himself was wanting to speak about evil spirits *per se*, as opposed to speaking about poorly understood psychiatric and neurological diseases through the use of culturally accepted metaphors. Such diseases can create delusional symptoms that may be misunderstood as "possession." Mark 9:14-29 is an unusually detailed pericope about the healing of a boy whose symptoms, to the modern eye, clearly indicate epilepsy. Mark may have been trying to show that the healer Jesus understood epilepsy to be a treatable disease that deserves compassion, not a divine punishment demanding that the boy and his family be shunned. Such an attitude would have shocked many pious people in the Greco-Roman world of the time.

⁴⁰ *On the Soul*, chap. 22.

⁴¹ *On the Soul*, chap. 4.

⁴² *On the Soul*, chap. 3, 6, 9, 14, 22, 38, 45, 51, 53, 54.

⁴³ *On the Soul*, chap. 28-33.

metempsychosis.) The soul has a corporeal substance, as the Stoics taught.⁴⁴ (Plato said the soul is incorporeal.) People receive their souls from their biological parents at the moment of conception,⁴⁵ but all souls are really derived from the one soul given to Adam⁴⁶ (Tertullian's own interpretation of Genesis 2:7). Human beings therefore have a twofold nature: the soul supplies desire and instigation (that is, will and choice, as in Wisdom), while the body supplies gratification and realization.⁴⁷ The soul's natural attributes are immortality, rationality, sensibility, intelligence, and freedom of will,⁴⁸ with no mention at all of *agape*, human dignity, or relationships. (Plato and Tertullian are in agreement on both the soul's attributes and the inferiority of love.) However, "all these endowments of the soul which are bestowed on it at birth are still obscured and depraved by the malignant being . . . [who is] ready to entrap their souls from the very portal of their birth . . ." ⁴⁹ (as in apocalyptic). When human beings sin, the principal offender is the soul, not the body, although both soul and body will have to answer to God for their offences⁵⁰ – hence the need for future bodily resurrection⁵¹ (as in apocalyptic). When people die, their soul is separated from their body, although this is not to say that death is

⁴⁴ *On the Soul*, chap. 5-8, 27.

⁴⁵ *On the Soul*, chap. 5, 27.

⁴⁶ *On the Soul*, chap. 25-26.

⁴⁷ *On the Soul*, chap. 27.

⁴⁸ *On the Soul*, chap. 38.

⁴⁹ *On the Soul*, chap. 39.

⁵⁰ *On the Soul*, chap. 40.

⁵¹ *On the Soul*, chap. 56.

either natural or free of suffering for the soul.⁵² “[D]eath happens not by way of natural consequence to man, but owing to a fault and defect which is not itself natural”⁵³ (that is, original sin). At death, the soul is driven out of the body because the soul is immortal and therefore indivisible⁵⁴ (as in Plato), but it still retains a corporeal nature that allows it to descend into Hades, “where every soul is detained in safe keeping . . . until the day of the Lord.”⁵⁵ An exception to this dictum is made for Christian martyrs, who, it seems, may enter Paradise as soon as they give their life’s blood in imitation of Christ⁵⁶ (as in Montanism).

Apart from Tertullian’s traducianism, his doctrine of the soul bears an unmistakable resemblance to the accepted Roman Catholic doctrines discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

What is striking about *On the Soul* – and what has been ignored by recent commentators – is the extent to which his lengthy doctrine of the soul reads more like a lengthy apology for a dualistic philosophy than an exhortation to Christian faith. It is not the dualism familiar to us from either Plato or Gnosticism, however, both of which are explicit in their claims that the evil physical body weighs down the soul and corrupts it. These kinds of dualistic theories are patently “black and white,” and are therefore easily recognized and argued with. Tertullian’s dualism is more sophisticated. It is what might be called an “ontological dualism” because it

⁵² *On the Soul*, chap. 50-53.

⁵³ *On the Soul*, chap. 52.

⁵⁴ *On the Soul*, chap. 51-53.

⁵⁵ *On the Soul*, chap. 55, where Tertullian refers to an earlier treatise he wrote, *On Paradise*. In chapter 58, we learn that Hades has two regions, one for the souls of the wicked, and one for the souls of the good, such as infants and virgins. Compare to the Jewish apocalyptic claims of 2 Esdras 7:75-104.

⁵⁶ *On the Soul*, chap. 55

relies on “proofs” about the two-fold nature of humankind to prove that a vast gulf exists between tainted souls and the untainted Christ. In Tertullian’s dualistic thinking, the schism of concern is not the difference between body and soul (although he maintains there is a difference between these two substances). For him, the schism of concern is the one that separates all of humanity from Christ. Unlike Plato’s body-soul dualism, which understands each individual to be personally responsible for the choices he/she makes in life, Tertullian’s philosophy can be described as a “group dualism”: all people in the world are descended from Adam, and all people in the world share a portion of the soul given to Adam by God; Adam sinned; therefore all of Adam’s descendants carry the taint of this sin that separates us from the goodness of God. We are all “one” in our inadequacy as human beings.⁵⁷ Once he has established this point, which explains why we seem to be naturally afraid, it is ever more obvious why Christians must live according to the *regula fidei*, and why they must honour the words of prophecy (revelation). People desperately need both in a world where the light of the divine is dimmed.⁵⁸

Eric Osborn’s 1997 analysis of Tertullian, which aims in part to show that Tertullian was not a fideist,⁵⁹ raises the issue of the early theologian’s “personal complexity,” and discusses different scholarly theories that have attempted to explain both Tertullian’s famous “puzzle” of

⁵⁷ Tertullian speaks comfortably of the oneness of all humanity: “. . . there is one soul and many tongues, one spirit and various sounds; every country has its own speech, but the subjects of speech are common to all” (*The Soul’s Testimony*, chap. 6). From our own perspective, we might like to interpret his words in positive terms as an endorsement of inclusiveness. Tertullian’s own context, however, shows that he wants to emphasize how much all souls (or, confusingly, THE soul) deserve death, yet hope for future salvation.

⁵⁸ *On the Soul*, chap. 53.

⁵⁹ Eric Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 27-28.

Athens versus Jerusalem, and his “paradox” of “credible because inept.”⁶⁰ With regard to four different theories put forward to interpret the Athens-Jerusalem “puzzle,” Osborn particularly dislikes the theory he labels “psychoanalysis of a puzzled mind.”⁶¹ Osborn prefers the fourth of the theories for “the puzzle”— what he calls “clarity through disjunction:”

Disjunction becomes a stylistic *tic* in the writings of Tertullian. He wants to simplify what others have confused. He resists (*apologeticum* 46.18) the reduction of Christianity to one among many kinds of philosophy. He fights (*de praescriptione haereticorum* 7.9) on the uncertain front between orthodoxy and heresy, selects the improper use of philosophy by heretics as the chief source of confusion and recommends, in this context, the renunciation of philosophy. Simplicity is his concern and disjunction his method.⁶²

Osborn uses the term “disjunction” rather than “dualism” or “mystery,” and sees it as a useful tool. He argues at length in Chapter 2 that others have misinterpreted Tertullian and have seen a puzzle where, in fact, only careful rhetoric exists. The problem, says Osborn, is that other scholars have failed to notice that the central claim of *The Prescription* is the perfection of Christ, rather than a claim of conflict between reason (Athens) and faith (Jerusalem). Yet the central claim stays in the background of the treatise, and must be inferred because it is not repeatedly hammered at. A careful reading, however, shows that “the final perfection of Christ solves each confrontation which Tertullian presents. . . . The perfection of Jesus Christ as son of God and saviour was the secret of simplicity, the rule of faith and the canon of truth.”⁶³

What Osborn does not say is that Tertullian’s theological solution of the mystery of

⁶⁰ In Chapter 2 (27-47), Osborn discusses “the puzzle,” and in Chapter 3 (48-64), he discusses “the paradox.”

⁶¹ Osborn, *Tertullian*, 28. Carl Jung apparently chose Tertullian “as a paradigm case of *sacrificium intellectus* . . . (total and self-inflicted intellectual castration).”

⁶² Osborn, *Tertullian*, 35-36.

⁶³ Osborn, *Tertullian*, 46.

Christ's perfection would have little power to persuade and convert others unless the potential converts were first convinced of their own abject imperfection. I would suggest this is the reason that Tertullian went to such lengths to devise a Christian doctrine of the soul. His doctrine of the soul presents the theological problem. His doctrine of Christ's perfection then presents the theological solution for the problem *as he himself has stated it*. To advance his argument, and to enhance the attractions of his religion in the face of other Greco-Roman religions that offered esoteric wisdom and divine inspiration, he appropriated the familiar language of both the free will (*physis-nomos*) thinkers and the mystery (*physis-Divine*) thinkers, without including the theological solutions of either of these two trilemma groups. It is a brilliant, coherent strategy which does not seem like either a puzzle or a paradox when Tertullian's writings are understood to be a novel solution to the *nomos-Divine* rift. Within this context, his theological solutions make perfect sense.

I would suggest that when Tertullian's writings are placed within the framework of the trilemma model, the question of whether Tertullian was a Christian or a Montanist schismatic is no longer relevant. He was not an apologist for Christianity *per se*, a religion that had existed in several different versions since the earliest decades after Jesus' death; neither was he an apologist for Montanism. He was an apologist for a particular school of theological inquiry that sincerely believes the most significant problems we face in human life – the ones that could most benefit from a tightly constructed theological solution – are those that revolve around questions of justice, judgment, law, tradition, prophecy, and God. For this reason, Tertullian drew heavily on these strands of thought where they already existed in Hebrew scripture, New Testament books, Platonic thought, Stoic thought, and apocalyptic thought. For the same reason, he chose to

ignore the very different vision of Jesus' teachings that were presented in the Gospel of Mark. We can infer from the content of his treatises that he could not reconcile Mark's theological priorities of *agape*, forgiveness, healing, and inclusiveness with the problem as he understood the problem to be. As a skilled rhetorician, he understood that his novel *nomos*-Divine solution would be rejected if it lacked internal consistency and logic. It was therefore logical for him to ignore the *physis*-versus-Divine themes that predominate in Mark, just as it was logical for him for him to appropriate the *language* – if not the intent – of free will and mystery. He found ample support for his approach in Paul, who, like himself, was a *nomos*-Divine thinker. Thus Tertullian was able to comfortably situate himself in the apostolic tradition of Paul and Paul's Christ Movement. He became, as Osborn calls him, the "first theologian of the west," although we might want to qualify that by calling him the first *nomos*-Divine theologian of the west.

In conclusion, we might ask what options are open to us in the United Church with regard to questions about the soul. Perhaps the most urgent need is for further research into the history of doctrines of the soul, particularly with regard to both Paul's and Jesus' own understanding of the soul. A second important task is for us to remain aware that whatever the historical doctrines say about the soul is neither proof of the scientific reality of the soul, nor a lack of such proof. At present, we have little strong scientific evidence for the existence of the soul, but this is not to say we will never be able to uncover such evidence. Human beings are only just beginning to develop the tools that will allow us to study the complexities of *physis* as they actually exist. We should not be discouraged from believing in the existence of the soul on the basis of an eighteen-hundred year old doctrine of the soul. God's creation is indeed good, as Jesus seems to have known, and part of that creation may prove to be the soul itself. "In life, in death, in life beyond

death, God is with us. We are not alone.”⁶⁴

Thanks be to God.

⁶⁴ From the New Creed of the United Church. United Church of Canada, *Voices United: The Hymn and Worship Book of The United Church of Canada* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1996), 918.

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