

The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD

Episode 398—"Is the Epistle to Diognetus Trinitarian?"

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Introduction

A few announcements:

- I announced last week that I am scheduled for a live, in-person debate with James White on whether the Bible teaches the Doctrine of the Trinity. It will take place at The Gospel Truth's debate conference on February 7th in Dallas, Texas. Tickets are now on sale (link in the description below).

We are still searching carefully for the first Trinitarian Christian in the history of the Church. We have explored the beliefs and christology of Clement of Rome, the Didache, Ignatius, Barnabas, Justin Martyr, and Polycarp. Not one of these early Christian theologians came anywhere close to articulating the doctrine of the Trinity. So our search continues.

This week, we will examine a work contained in the collection of the Apostolic Fathers, known as The Epistle to Diognetus. We don't know who wrote it, although we can infer a few things about the author. We also don't understand who Diognetus is. He may be a real person, or he may represent a larger audience, as the pronoun "you" appears in the second-person plural.

In any case, the author considered himself a Christian, and he wrote this apologetic work to defend the Christians. In doing so, he contrasts his Christian community with the pagans and with the Jews.

Scholars who specialize in the Epistle to Diognetus date its composition to somewhere between the mid-late 2nd century.

The 12-chapter epistle is actually the work of two different authors. Chapters 1-10 reflect the work of the original author, while chapters 11-12 reflect a different author. In the transmission of this work, the two were combined onto a single manuscript, but our primary source, *Codex Argentoratensis*, has a gap at the conclusion of chapter 10 with a marginal note alerting the readers that "and here the copy had a break." We will discuss the theology of both authors: the author of chapters 1-10 and the unknown author of chapters 11-12.

What does this second-century Christian work have to say about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

I. What The Epistle to Diognetus Says about God

- A. In Chapter 3, the author tells Diognetus about the Christians and their diverse worship practices. In doing so, the author says some complimentary things about the Jews and their understanding of God.
 - 1. "Now by abstaining from the kind of divine worship just mentioned, the Jews rightly claim to worship the one God who is over all and to consider him Master." (*Diognetus* 3:2).
 - a) This suggests that the author agrees with the worship of the Jewish God, since he does not say that their understanding of this one God is confused or wrong for being unitarian.
- B. The author comments further on the Jewish understanding of the one true God:
 - 1. "For the one who made the heaven and the earth and all that is in them, and who supplies what we need, is himself in need of none of the things that he himself provides to those who suppose that they are giving them." (*Diognetus* 3:4)

παρέχειν μωρίαν εἰκὸς μᾶλλον ἡγοιντ' ἂν, οὐ θεοσέβειαν. 4. ὁ γὰρ ποιήσας τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς καὶ πᾶσιν ἡμῖν χορηγῶν, ὧν προσδεόμεθα, οὐδενὸς ἂν αὐτὸς προσδέοιτο τούτων ὧν τοῖς οἰομένοις διδόναι παρέχει αὐτός. 5. οἱ δέ γε θυσίας αὐτῷ δι' αἵματος καὶ

C. The author again describes God in 7:2.

1. "But the truly all-powerful God himself, creator of all, himself invisible" (*Diognetus* 7:2)

οἰκονομίαν μυστηρίων πεπίστευνται. 2. ἀλλ' αὐτὸς ἀληθῶς ὁ παντοκράτωρ καὶ παντοκτίστης καὶ ἀόρατος θεός, αὐτὸς ἀπ' οὐρανῶν

D. Here is another description:

1. "For no one either saw him or made him known, but he himself revealed himself. And he revealed himself through faith, in which alone is one permitted to see God. For God, the Master and Demiurge of all, the one who created all things and set them in order, was not only benevolent but also patient." (*Diognetus* 8:5-7)

πλάνη τῶν γοήτων ἐστίν· 5. ἀνθρώπων δὲ οὐδεὶς οὔτε εἶδεν οὔτε ἐγνώρισεν, αὐτὸς δὲ ἑαυτὸν ἐπέδειξεν. 6. ἐπέδειξε δὲ διὰ πίστεως, ἥ μόνη θεὸν ἰδεῖν συγκεχώρηται. 7. ὁ γὰρ δεσπότης καὶ δημιουργὸς τῶν ὅλων θεός, ὁ ποιήσας τὰ πάντα καὶ κατὰ τάξιν διακρίνας, οὐ μόνον φιλόανθρωπος ἐγένετο, ἀλλὰ καὶ μακρόθυμος. 8. ἀλλ' οὗτος ἦν μὲν αἰεὶ τοιοῦτος καὶ

E. One final description of God:

1. "He alone is good." (*Diognetus* 8:8)

II. What The Epistle to Diognetus Says about Christ

A. Without question, the author of the Epistle to Diognetus believes in the preexistence of Jesus. What the son preexisted as is less clear.

1. "He did not, as one might suppose, send to them one of his servants or an angel or a ruler or any of those who administer earthly activities or who are entrusted with heavenly affairs, but he sent the craftsman and demiurge of all, in whom he created the heavens" (*Diognetus* 7:2)
 - a) This sounds remarkably like logos christology

- (1) The one true God made all things with his word, his logos.
As John 1:3 says, all things were made through the logos, but by God himself.
 - b) The agent of creation is explicitly denied to be an angel.
- 2. “As a king sending his own son, he sent him—a king; he sent him as a god; he sent him as a human to humans.” (*Diognetus* 7:4)
 - a) As a god (no definite article)
 - b) As a human
- 3. “When he had a great and inexpressible thought, he communicated it to his child alone.” (*Diognetus* 8:9)
 - a) The son is not omniscient
- 4. “He himself gave up his own son as a ransom for all...the imperishable one for the perishable, the immortal one for the mortal” (*Diognetus* 9:2)
 - a) The son of God appears to possess the attributes of imperishability and immortality.
 - b) If the son/child is the son of God, then God is, by definition, the Father alone.
 - c) Recall that God alone is good, something that is not said of the son. Also, the son is not omniscient. Furthermore, God is the creator and the son/child of God is the agent. This suggests that the Father is greater than the son, since the Father alone is good. These are unlikely to be coequal persons.

III. What The Epistle to Diognetus Says about the Holy Spirit

- A. How does the Holy Spirit relate to the Father and Son? In what way is the Spirit involved in creation? Is the Holy Spirit a conscious person in heaven alongside God and his child?
 - 1. The Epistle of Diognetus tells us nothing about the Spirit. The Holy Spirit simply is unimportant for his apologetic purposes.
 - a) Naturally, the true God is never defined as Father, Son, and Spirit. The true God is only one person, the Father alone.

IV. What The Author of Diognetus 11-12 Thought about the Logos

- A. There is an important comment about the logos and its relation to the son:
 - 1. “For this reason he sent his word, that it might be manifest to the world. This word was dishonored by the people, but it was proclaimed by the apostles and believed by the nations. This is the one that was from the

beginning, it appeared to be recent but was discovered to be ancient, and is always been born anew in the hearts of the saints. This is the eternal one, which today is considered a son” (*Diognetus* 11:3-5)

- a) In contrast to the author of chs 1-10. The author of chs 11-12 only sees the word as a son “today.” The author of chs 1-10 saw the son/child of God as the agent of creation.

(1) ὁ σήμερον υἱὸς λογισθεῖς.

- (2) There is a preexistence of the son, but it is not conscious. The son of the present only preexisted as a word, a word that always existed.
- (3) Sounds like a biblical unitarian
- (4) The author of chs 1-10 possessed a unitarian understanding of God, but believed that the son preexisted and possessed many of the divine attributes. Not all of them, but many of them.
- (5) Neither of these authors was a Trinitarian.

Thanks for listening to this week’s episode!

Join us next week as we unpack another famous christological passage, Psalm 110:1.

Please look forward to our next episode.

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Host: Dustin Smith