

CAUSATION AND "THE ANCIENT WORLD VIEW"

ROBERT M. GRANT

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

ONE of the most important ways in which early Christians set forth their understandings of the relation of God and Christ to the created world was by the use of various prepositions which are often identical with those used in hellenistic philosophy to indicate causal relationships. In philosophy the most important causal systems were those of the Platonists and the Aristotelians. A collection of philosophers' opinions current in the first century of our era describes Plato as using a threefold analysis of causes: $\upsilon\phi'$ $\sigma\delta$, $\xi\zeta$ $\sigma\delta$, $\pi\rho\delta\varsigma$ δ ; the primary one among them was the efficient cause ($\upsilon\phi'$ $\sigma\delta$), "which is mind." Aristotle, on the other hand, used a fourfold classification: material ($\xi\zeta$ $\sigma\delta$), efficient ($\upsilon\phi'$ $\sigma\delta$), formal ($\kappa\alpha\theta'$ δ), and final ($\delta\iota'$ δ).¹ A theological analysis based on the fourfold scheme is provided by Philo in his treatise *On the Cherubim* 125–27. The primary cause, $\upsilon\phi'$ $\sigma\delta$, is God; the material cause, $\xi\zeta$ $\sigma\delta$, consists of the four elements; the instrumental cause, $\delta\iota'$ $\sigma\delta$, is the Logos; and the final cause, $\delta\iota'$ δ , is God's goodness.² Obviously the terminology was variable, but what remained constant was (1) the notion that cause existed, (2) the notion that cause could be classified in a logically consistent way, and (3) the notion that there were either three or four causes. Systems with either more or fewer were not popular, for those with more seemed too complex and those with two were often regarded as implying the existence of three or four. The latter situation seems to be reflected in I Cor 1 30, where God is the one $\xi\zeta$ $\sigma\delta$ and Christ is the one $\acute{\epsilon}\nu$ ω (= $\delta\iota'$ $\sigma\delta$; cf. I Cor 8 6); in Athenagoras, *Leg.* 10, 1, where God is the one $\upsilon\phi'$ $\sigma\delta$ and the Logos is the one $\delta\iota'$ $\sigma\delta$ (compare Philo); and in *Leg.* 22, 8, where Isis-*physis* is described as both the one $\xi\zeta$ $\eta\varsigma$ and the one $\delta\iota'$ $\eta\varsigma$. The more common threefold classification occurs in I Cor 8 6, where we find God $\xi\zeta$ $\sigma\delta$, Christ $\delta\iota'$ $\sigma\delta$, and God $\acute{\epsilon}\iota\varsigma$ $\delta\upsilon\nu$. In a doxology, on the other

hand (Rom 11 36), Paul can speak without making any distinctions of God as the one $\xi\zeta$ $\sigma\delta$, $\delta\iota'$ $\sigma\delta$, and $\acute{\epsilon}\iota\varsigma$ $\delta\upsilon\nu$. In form his statement resembles what Marcus Aurelius says to *physis* (*Medit.* iv, 23): $\acute{\epsilon}\kappa$ $\sigma\sigma\delta$, $\acute{\epsilon}\nu$ $\sigma\sigma\iota$, $\acute{\epsilon}\iota\varsigma$ $\sigma\acute{\epsilon}$; but the Stoic emperor, it would appear, means "in" by $\acute{\epsilon}\nu$. In Col 1 16 we read that "in" Christ everything was created — and here too $\acute{\epsilon}\nu$ apparently means "in," as the next verse suggests — and everything was created $\delta\iota'$ $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\delta$ $\kappa\alpha\iota$ $\acute{\epsilon}\iota\varsigma$ $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\nu$. If this verse reflects a causal system, as seems to be implied by the parallel in I Cor 8 6 and by the way in which Col 1 15–20 is constructed, the primary cause is implied by the mention of "the invisible God," and the scheme is a fourfold one.

In Hebrews God is the primary cause ($\acute{\epsilon}\pi\omicron\lambda\eta\sigma\epsilon\nu$, 1 2) while the Son-Sophia is the instrumental cause ($\delta\iota'$ $\sigma\delta$); but both final and instrumental causation can be ascribed to God himself ($\delta\iota'$ $\delta\upsilon\nu$ $\tau\grave{\alpha}$ $\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\alpha$ $\kappa\alpha\iota$ $\delta\iota'$ $\sigma\delta$ $\tau\grave{\alpha}$ $\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\alpha$, 2 10). Finally, in John 1 1–3 we find that the Logos was both $\theta\epsilon\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$ and $\pi\rho\delta\varsigma$ $\tau\omicron\nu$ $\theta\epsilon\acute{\omicron}\nu$ (related to God as to the final cause?); in addition, $\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\alpha$ $\delta\iota'$ $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\delta$ $\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\epsilon\tau\omicron$. The creative work of the Son is the creative work of the Father, but the Father is the primary cause while the Son-Logos is the instrumental cause. Compare Athenagoras, *Leg.* 10, 2 (surely based on John): $\pi\rho\delta\varsigma$ (from) $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\delta$ $\kappa\alpha\iota$ $\delta\iota'$ $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\delta$ $\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\alpha$ $\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\epsilon\tau\omicron$, $\acute{\epsilon}\nu\delta\omicron\varsigma$ $\delta\upsilon\tau\omicron\varsigma$ $\tau\omicron\upsilon$ $\pi\alpha\tau\rho\delta\varsigma$ $\kappa\alpha\iota$ $\tau\omicron\upsilon$ $\nu\iota\omicron\upsilon$.³ The prepositions are transferable, not so much because of the ambiguities in hellenistic Greek (for which see Blass-Debrunner, § 212 and § 223, 2) as because of the theological view that the functions of the Father and the Son were both inseparable and separable. Thus Barnabas (12 7) can say of Jesus that $\acute{\epsilon}\nu$ $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omega$ $\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\alpha$ $\kappa\alpha\iota$ $\acute{\epsilon}\iota\varsigma$ $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\nu$.

The Father is thus the efficient cause of all (Philo; I Cor 8 6; Rom 11 36), the instrumental cause (Rom 11 36; Heb 2 10), and the final cause (Rom 11 36; Heb 2 10; probably Col 1 20). (He is also "over all, through all, in all," Eph 4 6, and human beings, at least, are "in" him, Acts 17 28.) The Son is never described as the efficient cause in the NT; he is the instrumental cause (I Cor 8 6; Col 1 16; John 1 3) and the final cause (Col 1 16). The function of the Holy Spirit in this kind of scheme is much less clear. An interpolation in I Cor 8 6 attested by Gregory Nazianzen would remedy the deficiency by stating that "in" the Holy Spirit are all things, and we are in him; but this is certainly not part of the original text.

Whether or not any NT writer had a clearly defined causal system of a philosophical type, it is obvious that causal relations played a significant part in the thought of some of them. This point can be reinforced by considering some passages in I Corinthians in which hierarchical

¹ Compare the threefold classification by the Middle Platonist Albinus (*Eisag.* p. 163, 35–37 Hermann; fourfold in Clement, *Strom.* viii, 18, 1 and Origen, *Ioh. comm.* i, 17–19 (pp. 22–23 Preuschen); fivefold according to some Platonists in Seneca, *Ep. Mor.* 65, 7–8. The doxographical materials are in H. Diels, *Doxographi Graeci* (Berlin, 1879), pp. 309–10.

² See H. A. Wolfson, *Philo*, I, pp. 265–66.

³ For contemporary hellenistic parallels see E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos*, pp. 240–50, 347.

relationships are expressed in various ways. (1) In I Cor 3 22–23 we read that (a) everything belongs to you; (b) you belong to Christ; (c) Christ belongs to God. (2) In I Cor 11 3 we read that (a) the “head” of the wife is the husband; (b) the “head” of the husband is Christ; (c) the “head” of Christ is God. And (3) in I Cor 11 8–9, 12 we read that (a) woman is “from” man (Adam’s rib) and “because of” man; (b) man (now) comes into existence “through” woman; and (c) everything is “from” God. The hierarchical relations are expressed in causal terms.

Naturally the idea of causation, especially in relation to final causes, is not always expressed with prepositions. The idea of God’s purposive activity is inevitably related to world views in which eschatology is prominent; the idea of purposive activity, both human and divine, is reflected in Paul’s fondness for the word *ἵνα*; and the idea that divine and human activity cannot be meaningless or purposeless is expressed when he uses such words as *κενός*, *μάταιος*, and *εἰκῆ*. Nothing could be farther from NT thought than the world-weariness of Ecclesiastes.

It is just at this point that modern world views often diverge from the view which seemed self-evident to most ancient writers both Christian and non-Christian. Modern ideas of causation and of the analysis of causation are quite different from those reflected in early Christianity, and in any attempt to “demythologize” the NT these ideas have to be taken into account.

Another NT theme in which prepositions and causality have an important part is the origin of Jesus. In some expressions related to origins, cause and origin are almost indistinguishable. “I came forth from the Father and I came into the world” (John 16 28) is a statement in which two kinds of “spheres” are contrasted; but the spheres are evidently related to questions of origin. In John 3 6 is the clear contrast, “What is begotten of flesh is flesh, and what is begotten of the Spirit is spirit.” In another passage (1 13) a triple negative statement shows what is *not* the true origin of believers (blood, will of the flesh, will of man) as contrasted with what it really is: *ἐκ θεοῦ*. Such statements about origins we may expect to shed some light on the theological purpose of statements about Jesus’ conception and/or birth. Thus we read in Matt 1 20 that what has been generated *in* Mary is *ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου*; the same meaning is conveyed by Luke 1 35: Holy Spirit will come upon thee, and power from the Most High will overshadow thee; *therefore* the holy product will be called the Son of God. The origin of Jesus is to be sought in the work of the Holy Spirit. It is therefore rather surprising to read in Gal 4 4 that the Son of God came into (human) existence *ἐκ γυναικός* and in Rom 1 3 that he did so *ἐκ σπέρματος Δαυίδ*, though in the latter passage the phrase *ἐκ σπέρματος* is qualified by the phrase *κατὰ σάρκα* (cf. Rom 9 5). It can be argued, of

course, that in each passage Paul is laying emphasis on the humanity of Jesus, and this argument is valid. But why did he use the preposition *ἐκ* when in I Cor 11 8–12 his statements imply that it is not correct? We must probably conclude that the argument in I Cor 11 is rather forced (as, indeed, much of it seems to be) and that Paul would ordinarily have spoken of human parentage as he does in Phil 3 5, where he calls himself “a Hebrew, of (ἐξ) Hebrew parents.”

The agency of Mary in the conception is emphasized by Ignatius when he speaks of Jesus Christ as conceived by (ὑπό) Mary “of (ἐκ) the seed of David and of (ἐκ) the Holy Spirit” (*ad Eph.* 18 2).⁴ These passages all make it clear enough that the causal origin of Jesus’ humanity lies in his having been conceived by a human mother.

In the writings of Justin, however, there is a certain confusion about Jesus’ origin. In semi-credal passages he invariably speaks of Jesus’ origin *διὰ [τῆς] παρθένου* (*Apol.* i, 31, 7; 46, 5; *Dial.* 63, 1; 85, 2); elsewhere he uses the preposition *διὰ* twelve times, *ἐκ* only twice, *ἀπό* once, and the phrase “son of a virgin” once. We might suppose that this usage meant nothing significant were it not that he twice states that “the blood of Christ was not from human seed (or, the human race) but from divine power (or, the power of God).”⁵ The mode of Christ’s conception was different from ours. We are begotten from moist sperm (*Apol.* i, 61, 10) or from a tiny seed, and from this come bones, sinews, and flesh (i, 19, 1). But Christ, born not of human seed but of divine power, had blood which was different from ours. In the view of many ancient writers human blood is contributed by the mother. Therefore we may conclude that Justin used the word *διὰ* in relation to Christ’s generation through Mary because she actually did not contribute his blood — or, for that matter, his bones, sinews, and flesh. Intentionally or unintentionally, Justin came very close to gnostic views of Christ’s origin.

Certainly his view was the gnostic one. Various passages in the writings of Irenaeus show that it was characteristic of Ptolemaean-Valentinian thought to hold that Christ came *per Mariam*; Irenaeus insists against them that the only correct expression is *ἐκ Μαρίας*.⁶ Some Gnostics avoided this kind of discussion by maintaining that the Savior was (1) *γεννητός καὶ παθητός* (i. e., human) but also (2) *ἐξ ἁγίου πνεύματος καὶ παρθένου* (Clement, *Exc. Theod.* 23, 3). But this statement presumably reflects an accommodation to church doctrine — at least in part; Ignatius more reasonably relates generation and

⁴ The formulas which Ignatius uses elsewhere convey the same meaning: *ad Eph.* 7 2; 20 2 (he was Son of Man because of his Davidic descent); *ad Trall.* 9 1; *ad Smyrn.* 11.

⁵ *Apol.* i, 32, 9 (cf. 11); *Dial.* 54 2.

⁶ E. g., *adv. Haer.* i, 7, 2; 15, 3; iii, 16, 1; 22, 1–2. See H. J. Schoeps, *Vom himmlischen Fleisch Christi* (Tübingen, 1951), pp. 6–7.

passibility to the human nature derived from Mary, nongeneration and impassibility to the divine nature derived from God (*ad Eph.* 7 2).

It is obvious that in discussions of this kind biological considerations are extremely important, and that in trying to determine what the modern significance of them may be we have to examine not only the general ideas about causation which are involved but also the question as to what ancient writers did or did not know about the process of conception.⁷ It would appear that before we can classify the theological statements about virginal conception as derived from (1) historical tradition, (2) myth, or (3) poetry we must first try to determine exactly what those who made these statements had in mind.

Finally — a topic to which consideration of the origin of Jesus has led us — we may say something about the notions of causality and of biology involved in the early Christian ideas of conception in general. Quite a few years ago, H. J. Cadbury pointed out that there seems to be a certain measure of confusion in the language which New Testament writers use when they speak of this subject.⁸ Whatever the sources of this confusion may be, it exists, and it continues in the writings of the earlier patristic writers. We may add that there is something quite different from confusion in what both Jesus and Paul say about marriage; neither of them ever explicitly relates it to the production of offspring. Just as neither says that marriage is intended for this purpose, so neither says anything about children as he discusses either marriage or divorce. Nowhere in the NT is there even an allusion to Gen 1 28: "Increase and multiply."

We shall not, therefore, expect to find conception discussed in the NT at all, and the writers among whom it is discussed are the apologists of the late second and early third centuries. (1) Outside the church the most common view, which goes back to Aristotle, was that semen (the formal cause) provided soul for the embryo, while the catamenia (the material cause) provided its body. (2) The Stoics, on the other hand, held that semen consisted of two elements, corporeal moisture and psychic *pneuma*, the latter evidenced by heat and foam. The body of the embryo was derived from the *pneuma* of the semen, combined with the female's *pneuma* (part of her soul). Thus according to Aristotle the embryo was the product of both father and mother, while in the Stoic view it was derived almost exclusively from the father. (All ancient

⁷ See W. Dettloff, "Virgo-Mater. Kirchenväter und moderne Biologie zur jungfräulichen Mutterschaft Mariens," *Wissenschaft und Weisheit*, 20 (Düsseldorf, 1957), pp. 221–26, with the literature there cited.

⁸ "The Ancient Physiological Notions underlying John I. 13 and Hebrews XI. 1," *Expositor*, 9 (1924), pp. 430–36; more emphasis on Jewish sources in C. Spicq, *L'épître aux Hébreux*, II, p. 349.

writers were completely unaware of the existence of the ovum.) In either case the semen was obviously animate, even if only potentially. (3) A minority view, ascribed to Pythagoras and others, was that both males and females emitted semen; this was too hypothetical to seem credible.

The statements of hellenistic Jews and Christians on this subject are not altogether consistent. The common view (#1) is reflected in the book of Wisdom (7 2) and in Philo, *Opif.* 132; but Philo also sets forth the Stoic view as his own (*Opif.* 67). The least we can say is that he was not concerned with the subject. What looks like the Stoic view (#2) is expressed by Justin in the passages quoted above and by Theophilus of Antioch (*ad Autol.* i, 8): "God fashioned you out of a moist substance and (epexegetical *kai*) a tiny drop." Athenagoras (*Leg.* 35, 6) condemns abortion on the ground that the embryo is animate; and it is probably animate because it owes its life to semen, as his comparison of intercourse to planting seeds suggests (33, 2). Clement of Alexandria usually holds that the *pneuma* of the semen produces the soul of the embryo, even though in *Exc. Theod.* 17, 2 he states that the embryo is produced from the mixture of two seeds. Finally, Tertullian reflects the same Stoic opinion. In his treatise *de Carne Christi* (19, 21–23) he holds that the "matter" of the semen, which is the heat of blood, is nourished by the mother's blood (cf. *de Anima* 27); and when he is explicitly attacking contraception he says that "the whole fruit is already present in the semen" (*Apol.* 9, 8).

Generally speaking, medical writers were aware that there was a difference between contraception and abortion (e.g., Soranus, *Gynaec.* 1, 61), although hellenistic Jews and Christians either unintentionally or intentionally confuse the two.⁹ It is fairly clear that when early Christian writers condemned contraception they did so largely on grounds derived from the scientific philosophy of their day. Unfortunately this scientific philosophy was based on inadequate scientific knowledge.¹⁰

We might perhaps suppose that when Paul speaks of *ἡ φυνικὴ χρῆσις* in Rom 1 26–27 he is implying that he agrees with the whole Stoic context in which such an expression is often found. But neither in this passage nor in I Cor 7 2–5 does he say anything about procreation as the goal, or even a goal, of sexual intercourse. Whereas his Stoic contemporary Musonius (fr. XIII^A, p. 67 Hense) stated that "the purpose of marriage is a common life and sharing in the production of children," and the great Galen (*de Usu Partium* 14, 9, p. 313 Helmreich)

⁹ E.g., Philo (in Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* viii, 7, 7); Athenagoras, *Leg.* 35, 6; Clement, *Paed.* ii, 96, 1; Tertullian, *Exc. Cast.* 12. Hippolytus (*Ref.* ix, 12, 25) makes a distinction but condemns both.

¹⁰ For Greek thought on this subject see J. Ilberg, "Zur gynäkologische Ethik der Griechen," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 13 (1910), pp. 1–19. On conception see J. H. Waszink, *Tertulliani de Anima* (Amsterdam, 1947), pp. 342–46.

was to say that the final cause of intercourse was the perpetuation of the race, Paul says nothing of the sort. His silence — eschatologically conditioned or not — must be respected as much as what he does say, especially at a point like this. He agrees with the Stoic moralists when he discusses mutuality in marriage; he does not necessarily agree with them at other points.

We have now discussed three subjects related to causation and have tried to suggest that in each case the early Christian writers should be allowed to say what they do say, whether or not their statements raise problems in our own times. In the first case, we have suggested that a causal pattern of thought underlies many important NT statements and that in providing NT exegesis it needs to be considered as fundamental. In the second case, we have seen how difficulties arose when some later Christian writers did not pay adequate attention to what the NT says. In the third case, we have argued that the silence of the NT also deserves respect and that some of the statements of later Christian writers are based on an inadequate grasp of biological phenomena. Obviously such cases raise considerable difficulties either for those who wish to maintain an unaltered tradition or for those who wish to “demythologize” only a few parts of it. All alike must constantly pay close attention to the earliest representations of the Christian faith.