

Creeds of the Kehillah ~ Part 19

The Nicene Creed ~ Part 5

In our last post, we continued to explore the **Nicene Creed**. This post digs a little deeper into the actual articles of faith in the **Nicene Creed**.

THE ALMIGHTY

Centuries of **Creedal** repetition have made it seem natural to associate the words **Father** and **Almighty**, and it now takes special effort to realize that this was not so in the early days of the church. The title **Almighty** is used many times in the **Tanakh** and the book of **Revelation**, but it occurs only once elsewhere in the **Brit Hadashah**, and in no instance is it ever coupled with the word **Father**. No doubt, the early **Believers** were happy to make this identification. However, although they did so almost unconsciously, a case can still be made for saying that there should be a comma between the two words in the first article of the **Creed** to emphasize that the terms are of independent origin.

The word **Almighty** is not an adjective describing a divine attribute, but a title given to the **God of Israel**, which is unfortunately obscured in translation. In our English Bibles, **Almighty** is used to translate the Hebrew name **El-Shaddai** every time it occurs, and its apparent Greek equivalent, Pantocrator. However, the Greek word is used more than 150 times in the **Tanakh**, where it sometimes translates **El-Shaddai** but more often **Yahweh Sabaoth** or **the Lord of Hosts**. Unfortunately, neither Latin nor English has exact equivalents of these names.

Initially, the word emphasized that **God** was the ruler of all things, a status that belonged to him because He had created them. The early **Believers** needed to maintain this essentially **Jewish** idea. Without it, the door was open to belief in an independent evil deity that could compete with the true **God** for power and influence. As time went on, the question arose as to whether **God's** universal rule implied that He could do anything and everything, and at first, **Believers** like Origen were inclined to say that it did. This view was modified somewhat later on, as other theologians (like Augustine) realized that **God** could not do things that contradicted His nature. This was not because He was not omnipotent but because it made no sense to say that **God** could do such things. They were no more than verbal constructs, with no reality behind them. For example, to ask whether **God** could commit suicide or do evil was to fall into absurdity since such concepts could not be applied to His being.

The fact that the **Brit Hadashah** presents **Yeshua** as the co-creator of the universe quickly led the early **Believers** to recognize that the **Son** must also be **Almighty God**. As the doctrine of the **Holy Spirit** was developed in the fourth century, the term was naturally extended to Him as well. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that this theological development, which was greatly assisted by the need to react against the claims of Arius, did not find its way into the **Nicene Creed**.

Maker

¹ In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ² The earth was unformed and void, darkness was on the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God hovered over the surface of the water. ~ Genesis 1:1-2 (CJB)

The doctrine of creation is one that the early church inherited from **Judaism**, and it is fundamental to any understanding of the **Tanakh**. Like **Jews**, **Believers** have always believed that the world was created by a good **God**, who is a personal being who cares for His creatures. He governs the universe by His providential care, and nothing can happen in it without His permission. Because of this belief, **Believers** have always had

to face the problems of what theologians call theodicy. These can be stated as the problem of the existence of evil, and second, the degree to which evil can affect those who believe in **God**.

The early **Believers** did not have to defend their doctrine of creation against **Jews**, except insofar as to say that it was the work of all three persons of the **Trinity** and not of the **Father** only. This issue became critical in the fourth century after Arius tried to maintain that the **Son** and the **Holy Spirit** were the highest of the creatures. ¹ Until that time, the bigger problem for the church was explaining and defending its doctrine against the many forms of paganism, including the most sophisticated pagan philosophies, which could not reconcile their understanding of evil with that of a world created by a good and omnipotent **God**.

As the implications of a divine ordering of the universe sank in, it became clear that **God** had to be understood as being in complete control of His creation, even when the latter appeared to go against His wishes. This led to an elaborate defense of divine foreknowledge, which included **Adam's** (future) sin and eventually to a refined doctrine of predestination, which is associated above all with Augustine. The Church Fathers were determined to avoid saying that **God** created evil or made it impossible for some people to be saved on the ground that they were not predestined. Still, the logical implications of predestination were hard to escape, and the fundamental dilemma remained for future generations to ponder and attempt to resolve in their own fashion.

Another issue that engaged the Fathers was the distinction between a world fashioned by **God** (out of preexisting matter) and a world created by Him out of nothing. The Bible emphasizes the former without denying the latter, but things were not so clear to the Greek mind, which was often dualistic in this respect. The Fathers argued that the word *maker* implied that **God** had created matter out of nothing since it had to come from somewhere. The fact that **God** had ultimately created it meant that matter must be good, not evil, and it was here that **Messianic** teaching confronted the most widespread pagan beliefs of the time. At the same time, the Fathers did not deny that it was the fashioning of matter into what the Greeks called the *cosmos*, which was the true glory of creation, and they often went into this in great detail. **Creedal** usage oscillated between “*maker*” and “*creator*,” with the latter word emphasizing the origin of matter ex nihilo. Still, it is clear from the comments made on it that both words are meant to convey the same belief in a **God** who has made everything according to the purpose of His mind and the intention of His will. ²

In my next post, we continue to dig into the first article of the **Nicene Creed**.

¹ This is the controversy that spurred the **Council at Nicea**.

² Bray, G. L., & Oden, T. C. (Eds.). (2009). **We Believe in One God** (Vol. 1, pp. 93–94).