



Docetism

In the history of Christianity, **docetism** (from the Koinē Greek: δοκεῖν/δόκησις *dokeîn* "to seem", *dókēsis* "apparition, phantom"^{[1][2]}) was the doctrine that the phenomenon of Jesus, his historical and bodily existence, and above all the human form of Jesus, was mere semblance without any true reality.^{[3][4]} Broadly it is taken as the belief that Jesus only seemed to be human, and that his human form was an illusion.

The word Δοκηταί *Dokētaí* ("Illusionists") referring to early groups who denied Jesus's humanity, first occurred in a letter by Bishop Serapion of Antioch (197–203),^[5] who discovered the doctrine in the Gospel of Peter, during a pastoral visit to a Christian community using it in Rhosus, and later condemned it as a forgery.^{[6][7]} It appears to have arisen over theological contentions concerning the meaning, figurative or literal, of a sentence from the Gospel of John: "the Word was made Flesh".^[8]

Docetism was unequivocally rejected at the First Council of Nicaea in 325^[9] and is regarded as heretical by the Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, Armenian Apostolic Church, Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church,^[10] and many Protestant denominations that accept and hold to the statements of these early church councils, such as Reformed Baptists, Reformed Christians, and all Trinitarian Christians.

Definitions

Docetism is broadly defined as the heretical teaching that claims that Jesus' body was either absent or illusory.^[11] The term 'docetic' is rather nebulous.^{[12][13]} Two varieties were widely known. In one version, as in Marcionism, Christ was so divine that he could not have been human, since God lacked a material body, which therefore could not physically suffer. Jesus only *appeared* to be a flesh-and-blood man; his body was a phantasm. Other groups who were accused of docetism held that Jesus was a man in the flesh, but Christ was a separate entity who entered Jesus' body in the form of a dove at his baptism, empowered him to perform miracles, and abandoned him upon his death on the cross.^[14]

Christology and theological implications

Docetism's origin within Christianity is obscure. Ernst Käsemann controversially defined the Christology of the Gospel of John as "naïve docetism" in 1968.^[15] The ensuing debate reached an impasse as awareness grew that the very term "docetism", like "gnosticism", was difficult to define within the religio-historical framework of the debate.^[16] It has occasionally been argued that its origins were in heterodox Judaism or Oriental and Grecian philosophies.^[17] The alleged connection with Jewish Christianity would have reflected Jewish Christian concerns with the inviolability of (Jewish) monotheism.^{[18][19]} Docetic opinions seem to have circulated from very early times, 1 John 4:2 appearing explicitly to reject them.^[20] Some 1st-century Christian groups developed docetic interpretations partly as a way to make Christian teachings more acceptable to non-Christian ways of thinking about divinity.^[21]

In his critique of the theology of Clement of Alexandria, Photius in his Myriobiblon held that Clement's views reflected a quasi-docetic view of the nature of Christ, writing that "[Clement] hallucinates that the Word was not incarnate but *only seems to be*." (ὄνειροπολεῖ καὶ μὴ σαρκωθῆναι τὸν λόγον ἀλλὰ δόξει.) In Clement's time, some disputes contended over whether Christ assumed the "psychic" flesh of mankind as heirs to Adam, or the "spiritual" flesh of the resurrection.^[22] Docetism largely died out during the first millennium AD.

The opponents against whom Ignatius of Antioch inveighs are often taken to be Monophysite docetists.^[23] In his letter to the Smyrnaeans, 7:1, written around 110 AD, he writes:

They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father, of His goodness, raised up again. They who deny the gift of God are perishing in their disputes.

While these characteristics fit a Monophysite framework, a slight majority of scholars consider that Ignatius was waging a polemic on two distinct fronts, one Jewish, the other docetic; a minority holds that he was concerned with a group that commingled Judaism and docetism. Others, however, doubt that there was actual docetism threatening the churches, arguing that he was merely criticizing Christians who lived Jewishly or that his critical remarks were directed at an Ebionite or Cerinthian possessionist Christology, according to which Christ was a heavenly spirit that temporarily possessed Jesus.^[24]

Islam and docetism

Some commentators have attempted to make a connection between Islam and docetism using the following Quranic verse:^[25]

And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, Allah's messenger — they slew him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain. But Allah took him up unto Himself. Allah was ever Mighty, Wise.
[Quran 4:157-158 (<https://quran.com/4?startingVerse=157&translations=19>) -Pickthall]

Some scholars theorise that Islam was influenced by Manichaeism (Docetism) in this view.^[26] However, the general consensus is that Manichaeism was not prevalent in Mecca in the 6th and 7th centuries, when Islam developed, and the influence can therefore not be proven.^{[27][28]}

Docetism and Christ myth theory

Since Arthur Drews published his *The Christ Myth (Die Christusmythe)* in 1909, occasional connections have been drawn between docetist theories and the modern idea that Christ was a myth. Shailer Mathews called Drews' theory a "modern docetism".^[29] Frederick Cornwallis Conybeare thought any connection to be based on a misunderstanding of docetism.^[30] The idea recurred in classicist Michael Grant's 1977

review of the evidence for Jesus, who compared modern scepticism about a historical Jesus to the ancient docetic idea that Jesus only *seemed* to come into the world "in the flesh". Modern supporters of the theory did away with "seeming".^[31]

Texts believed to include docetism

Non-canonical Christian texts

- [Acts of John](#)
- [Fundamental Epistle](#): In *Against the Fundamental Epistle*, Augustine of Hippo makes reference to [Manichaeans](#) believing that Jesus was docetic.
- [Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter](#)
- [Gospel of Basilides](#)
- [Gospel of Judas](#)
- [Gospel of Peter](#)
- [Gospel of Philip](#)
- [Second Treatise of the Great Seth](#)

See also

- [Adoptionism](#)
- [Arianism](#)
- [Avatar](#)
- [Binitarianism](#)
- [Christology](#)
- [Eidolon](#)
- [Lokottaravāda](#)
- [Patripassianism](#)
- [Spanish Adoptionism](#)

Footnotes

1. [González 2005](#), pp. 46–47: "A term derived from the Greek *dokein*, to seem, or to appear."
2. [Strecker 2000](#), p. 438.
3. [Brox 1984](#), p. 306.
4. [Schneemelcher & Maurer 1994](#), p. 220.
5. [Breidenbaugh 2008](#), p. 179–81.
6. [Ehrman 2005](#), p. 16.
7. [Foster 2009](#), p. 79. Serapion first approved its use, and only reversed his opinion on returning to his bishopric in Antioch, after being informed of its contents. He wrote a "Concerning the So-Called Gospel of St Peter", which is alluded to in [Eusebius's](#) *Church History* VI 12.3–6.
8. [Smith & Wace 1877](#), pp. 867–870.
9. [Ridgeon 2001](#), p. xv.
10. [Arendzen 2012](#).

11. Gonzalez, Justo (2005). *Essential Theological Terms*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. pp. 46–47. ISBN 0-664-22810-0. "Docetism is the claim that Jesus did not have a physical human body, but only the appearance of such."
12. Brox 1984, pp. 301–314.
13. Schneemelcher & Maurer 1994, p. 220: "N Brox has expressed himself emphatically against a widespread nebulous use of the term, and has sought an exact definition which links up with the original usage (e.g. in Clement of Alexandria). Docetism is 'the doctrine according to which the phenomenon of Christ, his historical and bodily existence, and thus above all the human form of Jesus, was altogether mere semblance without any true reality.'"
14. Ehrman 2005, p. 16
15. Ehrman 1996, p. 197.
16. Larsen 2008, p. 347
17. Gavrilyuk 2004, p. 80.
18. Schneemelcher & Maurer 1994, p. 220
19. Brox 1984, p. 314.
20. González 2005, pp. 46–7
21. Gavrilyuk 2004, p. 81.
22. Ashwin-Siejkowski 2010, p. 95, n.2 citing Edwards 2002, p. 23.
23. Streett 2011, p. 40.
24. Streett 2011, pp. 42–44.
25. Geoffrey Parrinder (2013). *Jesus in the Qur'an*. Oneworld Publications. pp. 112, 118–119.
26. Gil 1992, p. 41.
27. "MANICHEISM v. MISSIONARY ACTIVITY AND TECHNIQUE" (<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/manicheism-iv-missionary-activity-and-technique->). "That Manicheism went further on to the Arabian peninsula, up to the Hejaz and Mecca, where it could have possibly contributed to the formation of the doctrine of Islam, cannot be proven. A detailed description of Manichean traces in the Arabian-speaking regions is given by Tardieu (1994)."
28. M. Tardieu, "Les manichéens en Egypte," *Bulletin de la Société Française d'Égyptologie* 94, 1982.
29. Mathews 2006, p. 37.
30. Conybeare 1914, p. 104.
31. Grant 2004, pp. 199–200: "This skeptical way of thinking reached its culmination in the argument that Jesus as a human being never existed at all and is a myth. In ancient times, this extreme view was named the heresy of docetism (seeming) because it maintained that Jesus never came into the world "in the flesh", but only seemed to; (I John 4:2) and it was given some encouragement by Paul's lack of interest in his fleshly existence. Subsequently, from the eighteenth century onwards, there have been attempts to insist that Jesus did not even "seem" to exist, and that all tales of his appearance upon the earth were pure fiction. In particular, his story was compared to the pagan mythologies inventing fictitious dying and rising gods."

References

- Arendzen, J. (2012) [1909]. "Docetae". *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05070c.htm>). Vol. 5. Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved 25 April 2012.

- Ashwin-Siejkowski, Piotr (2010). "The Docetic View of Christ" (<https://books.google.com/books?id=45pfB4VaoAIC&pg=PA95>). *Clement of Alexandria on Trial: The Evidence of "Heresy" from Photius' Bibliotheca*. Vigiliae Christianae. Vol. 101. Brill. pp. 95–113. ISBN 978-0-19-518249-1. Retrieved 25 April 2012.
- Breidenbaugh, Joel R. (2008). "Docetism" (<https://books.google.com/books?id=yipXIHcteRsC&pg=PA179>). In Hindson, Ed; Caner, Ergun; Verstraete, Edward J. (eds.). *The Popular Encyclopedia of Apologetics: Surveying the Evidence for the Truth of Christianity*. Harvest House Publishers. pp. 186–193. ISBN 978-0-7369-2084-1. Retrieved 25 April 2012.
- Brox, Norbert (1984). "'Doketismus' – eine Problemanzeige". *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*. **95**. Kohlhammer Verlag: 301–314. ISSN 0044-2925 (<https://www.worldcat.org/issn/0044-2925>).
- Conybeare, Frederick Cornwallis (1914). *The Historical Christ: Or, An Investigation of the Views of Mr. J. M. Robertson, Dr. A. Drews, and Prof. W. B.* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=8lQwAQAAMAAJ>) Open court Publishing Company. Retrieved 25 April 2012.
- Edwards, Mark J. (2002). *Origen against Plato* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=FUGKAQAAMAAJ>). Ashgate Studies in Philosophy & Theology in Late Antiquity. Ashgate. ISBN 978-0-7546-0828-8. Retrieved 25 April 2012.
- Ehrman, Bart D. (1996). *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=HGpL9x19GaEC&pg=PT197>). Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-974628-6. Retrieved 25 April 2012.
- Ehrman, Bart D. (2005). *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and The Faiths We Never Knew* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=URdACxKubDIC&pg=PA16>) (2 ed.). Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-518249-1. Retrieved 25 April 2012.
- Foster, Paul (2009). *The Apocryphal Gospels: A Very Short Introduction* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=wt8J6wwQX9cC&pg=PT79>). Very Short Introductions. Vol. 201. Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-923694-7. Retrieved 25 April 2012.
- Gavrilyuk, Paul L. (2004). *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=im6YCAIcmo0C&pg=PA80>). Oxford Early Christian Studies. Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-926982-2. Retrieved 25 April 2012.
- Gil, Moshe (1992). "The Creed of Abū 'Āmir". In Joel L. Kraemer (ed.). *Israel Oriental Studies*. Vol. 12. pp. 9–58.
- González, Justo L. (2005). *Essential Theological Terms* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=DU6RNDrfd-0C&pg=PA46>). Westminster John Knox Press. ISBN 978-0-664-22810-1. Retrieved 25 April 2012.
- Grant, Michael (2004) [1977]. *Jesus* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=zVUxICZlgYIC>). Rigel. ISBN 978-1-898799-88-7. Retrieved 25 April 2012.
- Larsen, Kasper Bro (2008). "Narrative Docetism: Christology and Storytelling in the Gospel of John" (<https://books.google.com/books?id=3b2l8v2Gh8oC&pg=PA346>). In Bauckham, Richard; Mosser, Carl (eds.). *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing. pp. 346–355. ISBN 978-0-8028-2717-3. Retrieved 25 April 2012.
- Mathews, Shailer (2006) [1917]. *The Spiritual Interpretation of History* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=QCnZXJ50JVkC&pg=PA37>). Cosimo, Inc. ISBN 978-1-59605-138-6. Retrieved 25 April 2012.
- Pickthall, Muhammad M. (2001) [1930]. *The Glorious Qur'an: The Arabic Text with a Translation in English* (https://books.google.com/books?id=TPRHUs_k5t8C&pg=PA86). TTQ, INC. ISBN 978-1-879402-51-5. Retrieved 25 April 2012.

- Ridgeon, Lloyd V. J. (2001). Ridgeon, Lloyd V. J. (ed.). *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity* (https://books.google.com/books?id=neHX-lp_yegC&pg=PR15). Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-0-312-23854-4. Retrieved 25 April 2012.
- Schneemelcher, Wilhelm; Maurer, Christian (1994) [1991]. "The Gospel of Peter" (<https://books.google.com/books?id=TDW0PeFSvGEC&pg=PA220>). In Schneemelcher, Wilhelm; Wilson, McLachlan (eds.). *New Testament Apocrypha: Gospels and related writings*. Vol. 1. Westminster John Knox Press. pp. 216–227. ISBN 978-0-664-22721-0. Retrieved 25 April 2012.
- Smith, William George; Wace, Henry, eds. (1877). *A dictionary of Christian biography, literature, sects and doctrines* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=xLxk5AAACAAJ>). John Murray. pp. 867–870. Retrieved 25 April 2012.
- Strecker, Georg (2000). Horn, Friedrich Wilhelm (ed.). *Theology of the New Testament* (https://books.google.com/books?id=_fZDSzktBwC&pg=PA438). Walter de Gruyter. ISBN 978-3-11-015652-2. Retrieved 25 April 2012.
- Streett, Daniel R. (2011). *They Went Out from Us: The Identity of the Opponents in First John*. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche. Vol. 177. Walter de Gruyter. ISBN 978-3-11-024770-1.

Further reading

- Anesaki, Masaharu (1911). *Docetism (Buddhist)*. In: Hastings, James; *Encyclopaedia of religion and ethics, vol. 4* (<https://archive.org/details/EncyclopaediaReligionsEthics.hastings.13vols.1908-1914.1926>). Edinburgh: Clark. pp. 835–840.
- Blakemore, Joseph (2020). *Phantom Jesus - Intro to Docetism* (https://www.amazon.com/Phantom-Jesus-Docetism-Joseph-Blakemore-ebook/dp/B08FDZ6DG1/ref=sr_1_2?crid=18HM5PR62LPRH&keywords=Phantom+Jesus&qid=1655938713&srefix=phantom+jesus%2Caps%2C165&sr=8-2). p. 10.

External links

- [Docetae](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05070c.htm) (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05070c.htm>) in the Catholic Encyclopedia

Retrieved from "<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Docetism&oldid=1231343258>"

-