CHRISTOLOGICAL HERESIES

DOCETISM is broadly defined as any teaching that claims that Jesus' body was either absent or illusory. Broadly it is taken as the belief that Jesus only seemed to be human, and that his physical body was a phantasm. The word *docetai* (illusionists) referring to early groups who denied Jesus's humanity, first occurred in a letter by Bishop Seapion of Antioch (197-203), 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. 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". Docetism was unequivocally rejected at the First Council of Nicea in 325.

ADOPTIONISM, sometimes called “dynamic monarchianism”, maintains that Jesus was adopted as God's Son either at his baptism, his resurrection, or his ascension. Adoptionism was declared heresy at the end of the 2nd century and was rejected by the First Council of Nicea, which defined the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity and identified the man Jesus with the eternally begotten Son or Word of God.

MONOPHYSITISM is the Christological position that, after the union of the divine and the human in the historical Incarnation, Jesus Christ, as the incarnation of the eternal Son or Word (*Logos*) of God, had only a single "nature" which was either divine or a synthesis of divine and human.

- **371** Apollinarius’s views (an early form of Monophysitism [“one-naturism”]: Jesus has one, divine nature) spread
- **381** Council of Constantinople condemns Apollinarianism
- **440s** Eutyches begins teaching Christ has only one nature after the Incarnation—a divine nature
- **449** Through intimidation and bribery, a council at Ephesus (the “Robber Council”) declares Eutyches orthodox
- **451** Council of Chalcedon (Fourth Ecumenical Council) proclaims that Christ has two natures and condemns Monophysitism

*In the 500s, after repeated attempts at reconciliation, Monophysites consolidate in Coptic, Syrian, and Armenian communions*

EBIONITISM: An early heresy regarding Christ’s nature that originated from a Jewish sect called the Ebionites. They taught that Jesus of Nazareth was a good teacher and prophet, but that he was in no way divine. The Ebionites were an early Jewish/Christian sect who denied the divinity of Christ and all of Pauline soteriology. Some believed Jesus was virgin born, but none affirmed his pre-existence. They were ascetics who continued to strictly adhere to the Law and circumcision. They believed that Jesus was selected by God as the Anointed One because he perfectly kept the Law. For this reason, this group is sometimes associated with the Judaizers that Paul wrote against in some of his epistles (most notably, Galatians). Today, many believe that Jesus of Nazareth was not divine.
These include the various inquiries into the 'Historical Jesus' (such as the Jesus Seminar), Mormons, Muslims, and atheists.

**ARIA**NISM is the theological teaching attributed to Arius (ca. AD 250–336), of Alexandria who maintained that the precise nature of the Son of God was subordinate entity to God the Father, that the Son was the first created being, thus of a different nature than the Father. The First Council of Nicaea declared this a heresy and the Nicene Creed presents the orthodox position.

- **c. 318** Arius (250-336)’s views, that Jesus is not divine, gains popularity; Athanasius writes *On the Incarnation*, affirming the full deity and humanity of Jesus
- **325** Council of Nicea, called by Emperor Constantine, condemns Arians and affirms the divinity of Christ
- **328–361** Temporary triumph of Arianism; period of factions and confusion; Nicene bishops, like Athanasius, are deposed and banished
- **337** New Eastern emperor, Constantius, openly embraces Arianism
- **c. 340** First conversions of Goths by Arian Ulfilas
- **361** Valentinian, an orthodox, becomes Western emperor, and orthodoxy begins to recover lost ground
- **381** Theodosius, an orthodox, becomes sole emperor; Council of Constantinople affirms Nicene orthodoxy; Cappadocian Fathers put final touches on Trinitarian doctrine
- **390s** Arianism still alive among the Goths and other Germanic peoples

*Arianism disappears in the 700s through gradual conversion to orthodoxy*

**MANICHÆISM** Prophet Mani (216-276) founded this major Gnostic religion. Manichæism taught an elaborate cosmology describing the struggle between a good, spiritual world of light, and an evil, material world of darkness. Through an ongoing process which takes place in human history, light is gradually removed from the world of matter and returned to the world of light from which it came. Its beliefs, based on local Mesopotamian gnostic and religious movements, contained elements of Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism.

**NOVATIANISM** was the view held by followers of Novatian that Christians who denied their faith under the pressures of persecution were not to be readmitted to communion. **DONATISM** was the view held by followers of Donatus that sacraments administered by traditores were invalid.

- **249–250** Decian persecution causes many Christians to “lapse,” i.e., deny the faith
- **251** Novatian teaches that the lapsed should not be readmitted to the church; some Christians admit the lapsed on easy terms
- **252** Cyprian argues for middle view: penance for the lapsed
- **255–256** African bishops insist on rebaptism of heretics and schismatics; Rome disagrees
- **311** Donatists refuse to accept new bishop of Carthage because he “handed over” the Scriptures under persecution; they consecrate a rival bishop
314 Council of Arles condemns Donatism, which insists on unwavering loyalty of church members  
411 Donatism significantly weakened by government condemnation  
Donatism survives in pockets in Africa until Islam conquers the region (late 600s)

MARCIONISM originated in the teachings of Marcion of Sinope at Rome around the year 144 AD. Marcion believed Jesus Christ was the savior sent by God and Paul of Tarsus was his chief apostle, but he rejected the Hebrew Bible and the God of Israel. Marcionists believed that the wrathful Hebrew God was a separate and lower entity than the all-forgiving God of the New Testament. Marcion’s Bible consisted of eleven books: A gospel consisting of ten sections from the Gospel of Luke edited by Marcion; and ten of Paul’s epistles. All other epistles and gospels of the 27-book New Testament canon were rejected. Marcionism was denounced most notably by Tertullian, in a five-book treatise Adversus Marcionem, written about 208.

PELAGIANISM is a theological theory named after Pelagius (354 – 420/440 AD), although he denied, at least at some point in his life, many of the doctrines associated with his name. It is the belief that original sin did not taint human nature and that mortal will is still capable of choosing good or evil without special Divine aid. Thus, Adam's sin was "to set a bad example" for his progeny, but his actions did not have the other consequences imputed to original sin. Pelagianism views the role of Jesus as "setting a good example" for the rest of humanity (thus counteracting Adam's bad example) as well as providing an atonement for our sins. In short, humanity has full control, and thus full responsibility, for obeying the Gospel in addition to full responsibility for every sin (the latter insisted upon by both proponents and opponents of Pelagianism). According to Pelagian doctrine, humans are sinners because they choose to sin.

   c. 390 Pelagius moves to Rome and is disturbed by moral laxity
   c. 410 Pelagius teaches salvation by good works; some of his followers deny original sin
   c. 411 Augustine begins writing against Pelagius
   418 Council of Carthage affirms Augustine’s teaching
   431 Council of Ephesus condemns Pelagianism
   With the condemnation at the Council of Orange (529), Pelagianism dies out

APOLLINARIANISM was a view proposed by Apollinaris of Laodicea (died 390) that Jesus could not have had a human mind; rather, that Jesus had a human body and lower soul (the seat of the emotions) but a divine mind. The Trinity had been recognized at the Council of Nicea in 325, but debate about exactly what it meant continued. It was declared to be a heresy in 381 by the First Council of Constantinople, since Christ was officially depicted as fully human and fully God. Followers of Apollinarism were accused of attempting to create a tertium quid ("third thing," neither God nor man). Apollinaris further taught, following Tertullian, that the souls of men were propagated by other souls, as well as their bodies (see traducianism).
GNOSTICISM

c. 140 Valentinus begins teaching Gnostic views in Rome  
144 Marcion is excommunicated for Gnostic-like views  
c. 175 Basilides espouses Gnostic teachings in Alexandria  
c. 180 Irenaeus writes *Against the Heresies*, opposing Gnosticism  
c. 450 Gnostic sects diminish  
*Forms of Gnosticism return with Paulicians (800s) and Albigensians (1200s)*

QUARTODECIMANISM

c. 155 Polycarp and others from Asia Minor advocate Nisan 14 as date of Easter  
c. 190 Pope Victor insists on Sunday observance and tries to stamp out  
Quartodecimanism ("14th-ism"), though Irenaeus advocates tolerance  
325 Council of Nicea accepts Alexandrian method of determining Easter  
400 Rome begins using Alexandrian method  
*In the Middle Ages, the Celtic church (in 625) and the church in Gaul (in the 800s) join the West in adopting the Alexandrian method*

MONTANISM

c. 157 Montanus begins prophesying that the Heavenly Jerusalem will soon descend in Phrygia, in Asia Minor  
170s Montanism develops ecstatic and ascetic practices  
c. 190 Montanism condemned by church councils in Asia Minor  
c. 207 Tertullian converts to Montanism  
c. 400 Montanism wanes but survives in pockets  
*Though severely persecuted by Justinian I (483–565), Montanism survives into the 800s*

MONARCHIANISM

c. 190s Monarchianism (emphasizing God’s *monarchia*, “unity”—not the three persons) spreads  
c. 200 Noetus condemned at Rome for Patripassianism (“the father suffers-ism”), the teaching that the Father suffered as the Son  
268 Council of Antioch deposes Paul of Samosata and condemns Sabellianism (i.e., modalism: Father, Son, and Spirit are temporary manifestations of the same being)  
*By the early 300s, most Monarchianists become Arians*

NESTORIANISM

428 Nestorius objects to calling Mary *Theotokos* ("God-bearer"), but Cyril of Alexandria defends the term and condemns Nestorius  
431 Council of Ephesus declares Mary *Theotokos* and condemns Nestorianism  
436 Nestorius banished to Upper Egypt  
451 Council of Chalcedon condemns Nestorians, who gradually move to Persia and further east to form their own church  
*Nestorians remain a separate church to this day*