

The Distinction between the Patriarchs, the Fathers of the Church, and Apostolic Fathers

- By Rev. Fr. Nilindra Gunesequera sss

1. Patriarchs in the Bible

Originally, within a social context, a patriarch was a man who exercised autocratic authority as a *pater familias* (which in Latin means ‘father of the family’) over an extended family. The system of such rule of families by senior males is called patriarchy. This is a Greek word, a composition of *πατήρ* (pater) meaning "father" and *ἄρχων* (archon) meaning "leader", "chief", "ruler", "king".

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are referred to as the **three patriarchs** of the people of Israel, and the period in which they lived is called the Patriarchal Age. It originally acquired its religious meaning in the Septuagint version of the Bible (1 Chr. 24:31; 1 Chr. 27:22; 2 Chr. 23:20; 2 Chr. 19:8; 2 Chr. 26:12).

The word *patriarch* as applied to Biblical personages in the Septuagint version, where it is used in a broad sense, including religious and civil officials (e.g. I Par., xxiv, 31; xxvii, 22). In the more restricted sense and common usage it is applied to the antediluvian fathers of the human race, and more particularly to the three great progenitors of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In the New Testament the term is extended also to the sons of Jacob (Acts 7:8-9) and to King David (Acts. 2:29).

The earlier patriarchs comprise the antediluvian group, and those who are placed between the Flood and the birth of Abraham. The word *antediluvian* (synonymous with Prediluvian which in Latin means "*before the deluge*") is used to describe a period of time that preceded the Great Flood of Noah as related in the Book of Genesis in the Bible.

Of the earlier patriarchs who comprise the antediluvian group, the Book of Genesis gives a twofold list. The first (Gen. 4:17-18, passage assigned by critics the so-called "J" or Yahwistic document) starts with Cain and gives as his descendants Henoah, Irad, Maviael, Mathusael, and Lamech. The other list (Gen. 5:3-31, ascribed to the priestly writer, "P") begins with Seth and ends with Lamech. The intervening names are Enos, Cainan, Malaleel, Jared, Henoah, and Mathusala.

The fact that both lists end with Lamech, who is doubtless the same person, and that some of the names common to both are strikingly similar, makes it probable that the second list is an amplification of the first, embodying material furnished by a divergent tradition. The human personages set forth in these lists occupy a place held by the mythical demi-gods in the story of the prehistoric beginnings of other early nations, and it

may well be that the chief value of the inspired account given of them is didactic, destined in the mind of the sacred writer to inculcate the great truth of monotheism which is so distinctive a feature of the Old Testament writings.

A difficult problem connected with the Biblical account of the early patriarchs, is their enormous longevity. The earlier account (Gen. 4:17-18) gives only the names of the patriarchs there mentioned, with the incidental indication that the city built by Cain was called after his son Henoch. The later narrative (Gen. 5:3-31) states the age at which each patriarch begot his first-born son, the number of years he lived after that event, together with the sum total of the years of his life. Nearly all of the antediluvian fathers are represented as living to the age of 900 or thereabouts, Mathusala, the oldest, reaching 969.

These figures have always constituted a most difficult problem for commentators and Bible readers. Many hypotheses have been conjectured in the quest for an explanation: 1). the years mentioned were not of ordinary duration but of one or more months; 2). the ages given are not those of individuals, but signify epochs of antediluvian history, and that each is named after its most illustrious representative; 3). the legends of many people assert the great longevity of their early ancestors, a circumstance which is said to imply an original tradition to that effect (cf. the first seven Egyptian kings are said to have reigned for a period of 12,300 years, making an average of about 1757 years for each, and Josephus, who is preoccupied with a desire to justify the Biblical narrative, quotes Ephorus and Nicolaus as relating "that the ancients lived a thousand years". He adds, however, "But as to these matters, let every one look upon them as he thinks fit"-*Antiq.*, I, iii, *in fine*);

On the other hand, there is no trustworthy historic or scientific evidence indicating that the average span of human life was greater in primitive than in modern times. In Gen. 6:3, God is represented as decreeing by way of punishment of the universal corruption which was the occasion of the Flood, that henceforth the days of man "shall be a hundred and twenty years". This indicates a point at which physical deterioration of the race resulted in a marked decrease in longevity. But in Gen. 11, the ages of the subsequent patriarchs were by no means limited to 120 years. Sem lived to the age of 600.

The better explanation would be in understanding the function of literary genre of genealogy, saga and myth. A genealogy is a list that traces ancestral descendant and/or relationship. It can either be linear giving only one line of descendant as in Gen. 5, or it can be segmented – branching – as in the list of sons of Jacob in Gen. 46:8-27. Ancient genealogies were not intended to be historical records. They include more than blood relationships, for they indicate the ties formed by commerce, geography, and other concerns. Myths are defined by Gunkel as a narrative about the gods as in Gen. 6:1-4. It is also viewed as the story that accompanies ritual. Saga is defined by G. Coats as a long, prose, traditional narrative, having an episodic structure and developed around stereotyped themes or objects as in Gen. 1-11. The J strand in Gen. 1-11 is a saga. Hence, the longevity of the patriarchs are to be understood as a characteristic feature of a specific literary genre and not as a historical truth.

Over the centuries, the word ‘Patriarch’ has mainly taken on specific ecclesiastical meanings. In particular, the highest-ranking bishops in Eastern Orthodoxy, Oriental Orthodoxy, the Roman Catholic Church (above Major Archbishop and primate), and the Assyrian Church of the East are called patriarchs. The office and ecclesiastical conscription (comprising one or more provinces, though outside his own (arch)diocese he is often without enforceable jurisdiction) of such a patriarch is called a patriarchate. Historically, a Patriarch may often be the logical choice to act as Ethnarch, representing the community that is identified with his religious confession within a state or empire of a different creed (as Christians within the Ottoman Empire).

1.2 Patriarchs in Oriental Orthodox Churches



The Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of All Africa and the head of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria in Egypt and All Africa and the Spiritual Leader of Oriental Orthodoxy

- The Patriarch of Antioch and All the East and the head of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch and Supreme Leader of the Universal Syriac Orthodox Church in the Near East
 - The Catholicos of India and the head of the Malankara Jacobite Syriac Orthodox Church in India

HH Pope Shenouda III,
117th Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of All Africa
on the Apostolic Throne of St Mark

- The Catholicos of Etchmiadzin, Armenia and of All Armenians and Supreme Patriarch of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church
 - The Catholicos of Cilicia and head of the Armenian Apostolic Church of the House of Cilicia in Antelias, Lebanon and the Middle East
 - The Patriarch of Constantinople for the Armenians in Turkey
 - The Patriarch of Jerusalem and of Holy Zion for the Armenians in Israel, Palestine, Jordan and the Persian Gulf
- The Catholicos of the East and the head of the Indian Orthodox Church in India
- The Archbishop of Axum and Patriarch Catholicos of All Ethiopia and the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in Ethiopia
- The Archbishop of Asmara and Patriarch of All Eritrea and the head of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church in Eritrea

1.3 Patriarchs of the Eastern Orthodox Churches



- Ecumenical Patriarch, head of the Orthodox Church of Constantinople and the Spiritual Leader of Eastern Orthodoxy
- The Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa and the head of the Greek Orthodox Church of Alexandria in All Africa
- The Patriarch of Antioch and the head of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East in the Near East
- The Patriarch of Jerusalem and the head of the Greek Orthodox Church of Jerusalem and Holy Zion in Israel, Palestine, Jordan and All Arabia

Bartholomew I, Archbishop of Constantinople and Ecumenical Patriarch.

- The Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia and the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia
- The Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia and the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Georgia
- The Patriarch of Serbia and the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Serbia (and the former Yugoslavia)
- The Patriarch of All Romania and the head of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Romania
- The Patriarch of All Bulgaria and the head of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in Bulgaria

1.4 Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East

- The Catholicos-Patriarch of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, head of the Assyrian Church of the East in the Near East

1.5 Patriarch of the Ancient Church of the East

- The Catholicos-Patriarch of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, head of the Ancient Church of the East in the Near East (separated from the Assyrian Church of the East in 1964)

1.6 Patriarch of the Nasrani (Assyrian) Church of the East

- The Catholicos of Jerusalem of the Church of the East

1.7 Patriarchs of the Catholic Church



As part of the Pentarchy, the Pope's Patriarchate of Rome was the only one in the Western Roman empire. It was roughly coterminous with present territory of the Latin Rite. In the past popes have used the title *Patriarch of the West*. However, this title was removed from a reference publication issued by the Vatican in 2006.

Catholic Patriarchal coat of arms

1.7. a Latin Rite Patriarchs

- The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem
- The Patriarch of the East Indies a titular patriarchal see, united to Goa and Daman.
- The Patriarch of Lisbon
- The Patriarch of Venice
- The Patriarch of the West Indies a titular patriarchal see, vacant since 1963

1.7.b Patriarchs of the Eastern Catholic Churches



- The Coptic Catholic Patriarch of Alexandria and head of the Coptic Catholic Church
- The Syrian Catholic Patriarch of Antioch and the head of the Syrian Catholic Church

Patriarch Gregory III Laham
of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church

- The Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch of Antioch and the head of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church; united to it are two now titular patriarchal sees, both in Middle Eastern Pentarchy cities:
 - Melkite Catholic Patriarch of Alexandria (in Egypt)
 - Melkite Catholic Patriarchs of Jerusalem (in Palestine/Israel)
- The Maronite Patriarch of Antioch, head of the Maronite Church
- The Chaldean Catholic Patriarch of Babylon and the head of the Chaldean Catholic Church
- The Armenian Catholic Patriarch of Cilicia and the head of the Armenian Catholic Church

1.7.c Historical Patriarchs in the Roman Catholic Church

- The Latin Patriarch of Antioch
- The Latin Patriarch of Alexandria
- The Patriarch of Aquileia
- The Latin Patriarch of Carthage
- The Latin Patriarch of Constantinople
- The Patriarch of Grado

2. The Apostolic Fathers of the Church

The Apostolic Fathers are a small group of Christian authors who lived and wrote in the second half of the 1st century and the first half of the 2nd century and who are acknowledged as leaders in the early church, but whose writings were not included in the New Testament Biblical canon, at least as finalized in Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestant Christianity. Apostolic fathers include St. Clement of Rome, St. Ignatius of Antioch, and St. Polycarp of Smyrna. The tradition they represent holds the Jewish Scriptures to be inspired by God and holds that the Jewish prophets point to the actual flesh and blood of Jesus through which both Jew and Gentile are saved. Furthermore, they present the picture of an organized Church made up of many different cross-cultural, sister churches sharing one apostolic tradition.

The term “Apostolic Fathers” has been used since the 17th century to emphasize that these authors had personal contact with the Apostles. They form the link between the Apostles who knew Jesus of Nazareth and the Church Fathers, who were later generation Christian apologists and defenders of orthodox doctrine.

2.1 Who Were These Apostolic Fathers

- a. St. Clement of Rome. Clement's epistle, 1 Clement (c 96),

Tradition identifies Clement as the fourth Bishop of Rome

- b. St. Ignatius of Antioch.

Saint Ignatius of Antioch (also known as Theophorus) (c 35-110) was the third Bishop or Patriarch of Antioch and a student of the Apostle John. En route to his martyrdom in Rome, Ignatius wrote a series of letters which have been preserved as an example of the theology of the earliest Christians.

He clearly identifies the local-church hierarchy composed of bishop, presbyters, and deacons and claims to have spoken in some of the churches through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He is the second after Clement to mention Paul's epistles.

- c. St. Polycarp of Smyrna.

Saint Polycarp of Smyrna (c 69- ca. 155) was a Christian bishop of Smyrna (now İzmir in Turkey). It is recorded that "He had been a disciple of John." The options for this John are John the son of Zebedee traditionally viewed as the author of the Fourth Gospel, or John the Presbyter. In 155, the Smyrnans demanded Polycarp's execution as a Christian, and he died a martyr. His story has it that the flames built to kill him refused to burn him, and that when he was stabbed to death, so much blood issued from his body that it quenched the flames around him. Church Father Irenaeus was one of Polycarp's students.



The Didache and Shepherd of Hermas are usually placed among the writings of the Apostolic Fathers although their authors are unknown. The Didache (in Greek means "Teaching") is a brief early Christian treatise, dated to the early second century. It contains instructions for Christian communities. The text constituted the first written catechism, and contains three main sections dealing with baptism and eucharist, and Church organization. The text itself had been lost, but was rediscovered in 1873. The Shepherd of Hermas (2nd century). The work comprises five visions, twelve mandates, and ten parables. It relies on allegory and pays special attention to the Church, calling the faithful to repent of the sins that have harmed it.

3. The Fathers of the Church (Church Fathers or Early Church Fathers)

The Church Fathers, Early Church Fathers, or Fathers of the Church are the early and influential theologians and writers in the Christian Church, particularly those of the first five centuries of Christian history.

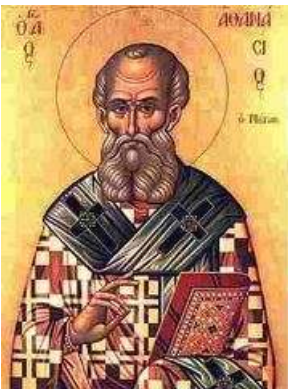
3.1 The Greek Fathers of the Church

Those who wrote in Greek are called the Greek (Church) Fathers. Famous Greek Fathers include St. Irenaeus of Lyons (whose work has survived only in Latin translation), Clement of Alexandria, Origen, St. Athanasius of Alexandria, St. John Chrysostom, and the Three Cappadocian Fathers.

Saint Irenaeus, (b. 2nd century; d. end of 2nd/beginning of 3rd century) was bishop of Lugdunum in Gaul, which is now Lyons, France. His writings were formative in the early development of Christian theology.

Clement of Alexandria (Titus Flavius Clemens) (c.150-211/216), was the first member of the Church of Alexandria to be more than a name, and one of its most distinguished teachers. He was born about the middle of the 2nd century, and died between 211 and 216. He united Greek philosophical traditions with Christian doctrine. Origen succeeded Clement as head of the Alexandrian school.

Origen, or Origen Adamantius (c 185 - c254) was an early Christian scholar and theologian. According to tradition, he was an Egyptian who taught in Alexandria, reviving the Catechetical School of Alexandria where Clement had taught. The patriarch of Alexandria at first supported Origen but later expelled him for being ordained without the patriarch's permission. He relocated to Caesarea Maritima and died thereafter being tortured during a persecution. Using his knowledge of Hebrew, he produced a corrected Septuagint. He wrote commentaries on all the books of the Bible. He imagined even demons being reunited with God. For Origen, God was not Yahweh but the First Principle, and Christ, the Logos, was subordinate to him. His views of a hierarchical structure in the Trinity, the temporality of matter, 'the fabulous preexistence of souls,' and 'the monstrous restoration which follows from it' were declared anathema in the 6th century.



Pope Athanasius I of Alexandria (c 293-May 2, 373), also known as St. Athanasius the Great and St. Athanasius the Apostolic, was a theologian, Pope of Alexandria, a Church Father, and a noted Egyptian leader of the fourth century. He is best remembered for his role in the conflict with Arius and Arianism.

At the first Council of Nicaea (325), Athanasius argued against Arius and his doctrine that Christ is of a distinct substance from the Father.

Saint John Chrysostom (c 347– c 407), archbishop of Constantinople, is known for his eloquence in preaching and public speaking, his denunciation of abuse of authority by both ecclesiastical and political leaders, the *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*, and his ascetic sensibilities. Outside the Christian tradition Chrysostom is noted for eight of his sermons which played a considerable part in the history of Christian antisemitism, and were extensively misused by the Nazis in their ideological campaign against the Jews.

The Cappadocian Fathers were a 4th-century monastic family, led by St Makrina who provided a central place for her brothers to study and meditate, and also to provide a peaceful shelter for their mother. Abbess Makrina fostered the education and development of three men who collectively became designated the Cappadocian Fathers, Basil the Great who was the second oldest of Makrina's brothers (the first being the famous Christian jurist Naucratus) and eventually became a bishop, Gregory of Nyssa who also became eventually a bishop of the diocese associated thereafter with his name, and Peter who was the youngest of Makrina's brothers and later became bishop of Sebaste. These scholars together with Gregory Nazianzus, Patriarch of Constantinople demonstrated that Christian faith, while it was against many of the ideas of Plato and Aristotle (and other Greek Philosophers), was an almost scientific and distinctive movement with the healing of the soul of man and his union with God at its center- one best represented by monasticism. Their major contributions were to the definition of the Trinity finalized at the First Council of Constantinople in 381 and the final version of the Nicene Creed which was formulated there.

Subsequent to the First Council of Nicaea, Arianism did not simply disappear. The semi-Arians taught that the Son is of like substance with the Father (homoiousios) as against the outright Arians who taught that the Son was like the Father (homoean). So the Son was held to be *like* the Father but not of the same essence as the Father.

The Cappadocians worked to bring these semi-Arians back to the Orthodox cause. In their writings they made extensive use of the (now orthodox) formula 'three substances (hypostases) in one essence (ousia),' and thus explicitly acknowledged a distinction between the Father and the Son (a distinction that Nicaea had been accused of blurring), but at the same time insisting on their essential unity.



3.2 The Latin Fathers of the Church

Those fathers who wrote in Latin are called the Latin (Church) Fathers. Famous Latin Fathers include the Montanist Tertullian, St. Cyprian of Carthage, St. Gregory the Great, St. Augustine of Hippo, St. Ambrose of Milan, and St. Jerome.

Later a group of Latin Church Fathers came to be known as Apologetic Fathers because in the face of criticism from Greek philosophers and facing persecution, they wrote to justify and defend Christian doctrine. Important Fathers of this era are St. Justin Martyr, Tatian, Athenagoras of Athens, Hermias and Tertullian.

Yet another group of Latin Church Fathers came to be known as Desert Fathers. The Desert Fathers were early monastics living in the Egyptian desert; although they did not write as much, their influence was also great. Among them are St. Anthony the Great and St. Pachomius. A great number of their usually short sayings is collected in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* ("Sayings of the Desert Fathers").




The **Desert Fathers** were Christian Hermits, Ascetics and Monks who lived mainly in the Scetes desert of Egypt, beginning in about the third century. Very few of the Desert Fathers lived in other deserted regions of Egypt. The original desert hermits were Christians fleeing the chaos and persecution of the Roman Empire's Crisis of the third century. Christians were often made into scapegoats during these times of unrest, and near the end of the century, this persecution was made systematic by the emperor Diocletian. In Egypt, Christian refugee communities formed at the edges of population centers, far enough away to be safe from Imperial scrutiny, but still close enough to have access to civilization. Records from this time indicate that Christians often lived in tombs and trashheaps on the edges of major cities, more or less protected by their obscurity.

Coptic icon of Saint Anthony the Great, a pioneering Desert Father

In 313, when Christianity was made legal in Egypt by Diocletian's successor Constantine I, a trickle of individuals, many of them young men, continued to live in these marginal areas. The solitude of these places attracted them; the privations of the

desert were a means of learning stoic self-discipline. These young men saw in Jesus' fasting on the mountain and in his cousin John the Baptist (himself a desert hermit) two models for such self-discipline. These individuals believed that desert life would teach them to eschew the things of this world and allow them to follow God's call in a more deliberate and individual way.

Thus, during the fourth century, the empty areas around Egyptian cities continued to attract Christians from the world over, wishing to live in solitude. As the lifestyle developed, these men and women developed a reputation for holiness and wisdom. In its early form, each or less an individual perhaps learning some other monks, but their own unique (and idiosyncratic) notably Anthony the Shenouda the developed a more desert life, and aspects of community common prayer and eventually develop monasticism. Many part of their lives in went on to become Church and society of century, among them Alexandria, John Cassian, and



hermit followed more spiritual program, basic practices from developing them into sometimes highly practice. Later monks, Great, Pachomius and Archimandrite, regularized approach to introduced some living (especially meals) that would into Christian individuals who spent the Egyptian desert important figures in the the fourth and fifth Athanasius of Chrysostom, John Augustine of Hippo. Through the work of these last two, the spirituality of the desert fathers, emphasizing an ascent to God through periods of purgation and illumination that led to unity with the Divine, deeply affected the spirituality of the Western Church. For this reason, the writings and spirituality of the desert fathers are still of interest to many people today.

A small number of Church Fathers wrote in other languages: Saint Ephrem, for example, wrote in Syriac, though his works were widely translated into Latin and Greek.

In the Roman Catholic Church, St. John of Damascus, who lived in the 8th century, is generally considered to be the last of the Church Fathers and at the same time the first seed of the next period of church writers, scholasticism. St. Bernard is also at times called the last of the Church Fathers.