

# Logos and Zoe

by Sven Nilsen, 2025

*In Early Christianity, people sometimes refer to two fundamental philosophical concepts of divinity, described as Logos and Zoe. Here I discuss why this development of thought was lost to history and how it might be restored in order to recover some of the cultural valuable inheritance.*

I am skeptical toward using the Jesus character as an example worth following in modern times. Surely, Jesus said some things that are useful. Yet, from a broader study of Early Christian writings, it does not seem to me that the character which Early Christians worshiped was a decent human being. For example, in Acts of Thomas, Jesus writes a slave contract, which is also the only case of Jesus writing something, besides the story in the Gospel of John where he writes on the ground. The latter might have been added by a scribe who added (according to Bart Ehrman), a section in the gospel which was meant to be a commentary written in the margin. So, the only scholarly solid case of Jesus writing something that originates from a 2<sup>nd</sup> century Early Christian, is a slave contract.

Writing a slave contract does not ring a mental bell for me of somebody who is supposed to be a perfect divine being. Quite the contrary, this raises a red flag that something very wrong is going on. Some Christians today might argue that Acts of Thomas is not an authoritative text describing the character of Jesus. Yet, to me, the author of Acts of Thomas seems to try to tie up some loose ends in the lore of Early Christianity with some effort, such as what happened to the snake from the Garden of Eden, without writing in an obvious ironic style, through attempting to make this text appealing for contemporary Early Christians. This informs me, from thinking this text was appealing at the time, plus the length of the text, that Early Christians understood the Jesus character in a different cultural way than people do in modern times. Understandably, slave contracts were universal in use throughout the ancient world, but slavery had its philosophical opponents and many Early Christians do not seem to fall on that side.

Regardless of whether the Jesus character was historically worth following as an example or not, it does not seem that this character survives the 2<sup>nd</sup> century intact of personal flaws in the delivery by Early Christians, long before Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman empire. One can take the position that this philosophical development ends here, causing a cataclysmic change in thinking throughout the Western world, but not carrying the cultural valuable inheritance that people want to be the case. I believe that many people are looking for something in history that is not there.

However, this does not imply that Early Christianity is empty of cultural valuable inheritance. Early Christianity in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century participates in contemporary ideas of philosophy, as was common for all mystery religions. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is associated with Logos, an ancient Greek philosophical concept that means Reason, which some translations turn into “The Word”. Shortly after, Zoe appears, but some translations turns this into “life” with a lowered capital. Zoe also appears in other Early Christian writings such as “Against Heresies” by Irenaeus. Based on the little we know about the parallels between Early Christians worshiping Jesus and the Simonians that worshiped Simon Magus, one might guess that Zoe was perceived as reincarnated goddess, similar to Helen of Tyre, but based on Zoe from the myth of King Midas, while Helen of Tyre was inspired by Helen of Troy in Homer’s Iliad. Zoe is a competing character to Helen of Tyre and was used to appeal to both groups, as they had close ties, for example through the work of Marcion of Sinope. Based on recent breakthroughs in biblical scholarship, the Zoe from the myth of King Midas might have been the basis for Zoe’s tree (Tree of Life) in Genesis, using a later date of Genesis than 6<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, when the myth of King Midas have originated, if not from Late Bronze Age.

It is not my intention here to discuss the origin of Early Christian doctrine. However, the scientific evidence suggests that Zoe might have been a distinctive character during Early Christianity, at least among some sects, should we believe Ireneaus. The precedent of a reincarnated goddess in Simonianism opens up for the possibility that Early Christians saw their tradition in line with ancient myths that were popular in the Hellenistic world. Reincarnation was a way of tying characters that people liked from older stories and put them in context to the new stories about Jesus. To Early Christians, it would seem as if both Logos and Zoe referred to actual historical figures, without having the modern concepts of historicity and source criticism.

When people in modern times try to project their way of thinking back onto 2<sup>nd</sup> century Early Christianity, we make categorical errors when classifying texts, such as not being able to distinguish between satire and serious texts. This makes it harder for us today, because the typical reaction to Early Christian writings has been, traditionally, to reject them as malicious attacks on the doctrine of Christianity. Yet, it is fully possible that they contain mixtures of literary genres and variants of differences between Early Christian sects, that during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century was not well organized.

In this sense, Late Christianity might be seen as an attempt to unify and sanetize the Early Christian literature, that creates a false historical lens to judge these texts. I believe there was no unification nor any underlying theological order that one can appeal to. There are as many versions of Early Christianity as there are authors of texts. To me, it becomes meaningless to pick one version and put it as an authoritative text of Christian doctrine, when the cultural valuable inheritance is in the diversity and creative freedom that various authors display.

Yet, for some reason, Zoe was either deliberately or unintentionally erased from the doctrine and replaced by, ironically, a life-less description without the associated character. Perhaps the hostility between Late Christians and Pagan religions (Pagan is actually a word for people living outside cities in the countryside and is not what people who practiced these religions called themselves) resulted in removing traces of Zoe going back to a common oral and literature tradition.

I believe that Zoe is a lost character to history, with irreversible damage. With other words, I do not think one can argue on solid ground how Zoe ought to be understood through the lens of Early Christians. There is no point in trying to achieve something that is impossible without more evidence. It is like knowing that somewhere in the desert, there is a buried treasure, but it is a huge desert and nobody knows where to dig to find it. Knowing about the treasure does little without the help of a map. In the same way, we can not reconstruct how Early Christians perceived the Zoe character, except from a few vague details based on comparative analysis.

This state of affairs fills me with sadness, because imagine if this was the case with the Jesus character: Nobody would have any idea of how Early Christians perceived Jesus and seemingly nobody cared much about it. That would be very provocative to know for Early Christians.

Still, I believe that the Zoe character might provide valuable lessons and become a cultural inheritance in the future. The reason is that I think many people today are too preoccupied trying to dig up some symbolic meaning in the past, that there is dubious evidence about. Zoe is an example of a character that still carries implicit weight through a broad cultural context, for example, through biology as the understanding of all life on Earth originating with some common cause in the past and evolving into different life forms over time, a process that took billions of years. This is a story, told through a scientific lens, that unites all living humans with all plants and animals, birds and fish, from mushroom to bacteria, as branches on the same tree. A story that only can be perceived in a large extent through Logos, when applying it as the original ancient Greek concept of Reason. The only life forms that can experience this story are those who combine Zoe and Logos. This is done without needing to appeal to some particular historical origin in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

I do not believe that our lives become more meaningful by interpreting or reinterpreting ancient texts, without devaluing these texts from the role they play as cultural inheritance. Whether we like it or not, Early Christianity had an enormous impact on the Western worldview. The transcendence of Logos through generations, although distorted by interests of keeping it tied toward particular belief systems, is a process that can be followed like a red line through history. Also, the loss of Zoe to history reflects some of the damage that human activity has caused on wild life in modern times, which during the past century has more than halved, measured by biometric tons. Acting with carelessness, the human species puts its own existence into danger and requires international agreements of protections. The upside is that Zoe in this sense is not being protected from the fall of man by original sin, but as a precious and beautiful aspect of nature. Our increased understanding of the importance of balance between Zoe and Logos provides an enrichment to our lives, surpassing the simple theology of Early Christians. In many ways, we have reached some of the level of knowledge that people in the ancient world associated with divinity. The question is whether we choose to live up to our inheritance in the future. The human species is a work in progress that has still not achieved mastery of these philosophical concepts.

So, what I am looking for, is not, in the sense that we should dig into history and try to reconstruct the Zoe character that way, but mostly what this symbolism means to us today, through a modern lens and in a modern context. The recovering process of this cultural valuable inheritance is also something that affects how we view Logos. Logos is not a non-dual objective good with a masculine bias, but overlapping with Zoe in the struggle for harmony, sometimes in conflicting but also in embracing terms. I do not wish to romanticize Zoe as an undivided good either. We still fight viruses and diseases using our best technology available. Neither should Zoe and Logos be understood as a matter of gender in opposition or exclusion to non-binary gender. I believe that is a stillly misconception of various levels of language where gender is expressed in various forms. People should be met with openness and recognition regardless of cultural background and beliefs.

I believe there is some potential in how we culturally think of these lost ideas, of Zoe and Logos. While one might regret the lost meaning of these concepts to history in how Early Christians perceived them in relation to each other, there is also an opportunity to make room for giving these concepts our own meaning, what we find valuable instead of just passing down knowledge from the past. These values are something we can grow over time and give as gifts to future generations. Accepting the troublesome past and all the mistakes that were made, we can continue with our lives, knowing about the influence from history, without being too obsessed by or taken prisoners by it. The potential is to find a balance, but a balance based on scientific evidence and realism. This balance does not have to be void of the imagination that Early Christians displayed in their texts, but might be made interesting for some people who might find science difficult and boring. It is also important that people can use their own creativity such that these concepts are not dogmatic in nature, but open and shared without the constraints of specific religious beliefs.

It is in this sense I believe it is a good thing that these ideas were lost to history, because it frees us from carrying the baggage of implicit meaning when using these terms. There is no reason to rely on the past to give life meaning. While history plays an important role in how it shaped our minds and influences us, we can be above history, in the sense that we are participating in the privilege of being able to construct some parts of history, but also knowing some missing pieces as stuff that is unknown to us. The unknown history can push us toward a future where we design our own rules.

Once upon a time, there was Logos and Zoe, but that is another story. For now, what matters is what you put into these concepts today that is meaningful to you, not people in the past. This idea of going forward from this moment, that can be any moment when people need it to be and not grounded in any historical moment, might be thought of Zoe and Logos, a simple reversal of seemingly insignificant order, yet also a distinctive action of raising above history to create a future.