



**Research Paper**

## **The Agenda-Driven Revision of Melito of Sardis**

**Michael Ronald Burgos**

[pastor.burgos@northwesthillschurch.org](mailto:pastor.burgos@northwesthillschurch.org)

GradXs Researcher for PhD from IIC University of Technology

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**ABSTRACT:** This article critiques the interpretive approach of philosopher Dale Tuggy, who seeks to recast the Christology of the second-century church father Melito of Sardis, portraying him as a "two-stage logos theorist," in which the logos is an attribute of God that becomes a distinct being at creation. Drawing on Melito's *On Pascha* and *Fragments*, this study argues that such revisions are agenda-driven, akin to those employed by groups like Jehovah's Witnesses and Oneness Pentecostals. A detailed examination of Melito's texts reveals a high Christology consistent with later orthodox formulations: Christ is eternally divine by nature, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, preexistent, and incarnate as both God and man. Key passages affirm the Son's immateriality, eternality, and role in creation, while refuting Tuggy's unitarian conclusions through contextual analysis and biblical parallels. The article concludes that Melito exemplifies proto-Trinitarian orthodoxy, and Tuggy's eisegesis imposes foreign theological concepts, demonstrating the perils of ideological bias in patristic scholarship.

**Keywords:** Melito of Sardis, Dale Tuggy, Christology, Unitarianism, Trinitarianism, *On Pascha*, Patristics, Historical Revisionism, Early Church Fathers, Incarnation, Preexistence, Subordinationism

### **I. Introduction**

Historical revisionism within the Christian tradition, whether in higher Pentateuchal criticism or in the various quests for the "historical Jesus," entails supplanting commonly accepted viewpoints with a novel interpretation of the data. Setting aside those who repudiate recoverable history, most who seek a fresh consideration of evidence presumably acknowledge a distinction between objective inquiry and ideological neutrality. While relative objectivity is achievable through rigorous application of the canons of history, neutrality is about as attainable as Quixote's triumph over his "giants." Agenda-driven revisionism occurs when the historian allows his ideological commitments to erase objectivity, such that the evidence can only serve the historian's project. Thus, the questers propose a Jesus made in their own image, just as Jehovah's Witnesses,<sup>1</sup> Oneness Pentecostals,<sup>2</sup> and Mormons<sup>3</sup> find an early church that accords with their theological commitments. Treading steadily in the vein of agenda-driven revisionism is Dale Tuggy. Tuggy earned his Doctor of Philosophy at Brown University and wrote his dissertation on a relatively obscure iteration of libertarian free will. He has leveraged his considerable expertise in

\* Michael R. Burgos, GradXs Researcher for PhD from IIC University of Technology (Enrolment no. FNR240402).

<sup>1</sup> E.g., "Against Knowledge—Falsely Called," *The Watchtower: Announcing Jehovah's Kingdom*, July 15, 1990, 21-3; "Did the Apostolic Fathers Teach the Trinity Doctrine?," *The Watchtower: Announcing Jehovah's Kingdom*, February 1, 1992, 19-23.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., David K. Bernard, *A History of Christian Doctrine*, Vol. 1 (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1995), 21-30, 43-86.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Hugh W. Nibley, *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Vol. 4 (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret, 1987).

philosophy to promote Socinian-style unitarianism and has repeatedly argued for a more favorable reading of several notable church fathers, including Melito. This study will provide a brief summary of the Christology found in both *On Pascha* and in Melito's fragmentary writings. Thereafter, an analysis and evaluation of Tuggy's claims regarding Melito is provided.

## II. Orientation to Melito of Sardis

Within our present moment, there is perhaps no early patristic writer as underappreciated as Melito of Sardis (ca. A.D. 100-180). The little that remains of Melito's corpus exhibits remarkable literary artistry and homiletical mastery, portraying both the beauty and genius of the Christian faith. His corpus is replete with poignant juxtaposition and paradox, especially in his descriptions of the deity of Christ and his incarnate humiliation: “[Christ was] carried in Mary’s womb, and arrayed with his Father...desiring food, inasmuch as he was man, and not ceasing to feed the world, inasmuch as he was God.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, his writings stand among the most interesting collections of the ancient church. Little is known about Melito beyond Polycrates' letter to Victor of Rome and what may be discerned from Melito's corpus. Polycrates observed that Melito “lived altogether in the Holy Spirit.”<sup>5</sup> Generations after Melito's death, Eusebius asked, “For who does not know the works of Irenaeus and of Melito and of others which teach that Christ is God and man?”<sup>6</sup> Melito is numbered among the Quartodecimans, who observed the crucifixion on the Passover.<sup>7</sup> He was a eunuch, whether through celibacy or otherwise, perhaps a Jewish convert,<sup>8</sup> and judging from his writings, Melito enjoyed a sophisticated education in rhetoric. According to Eusebius, Melito was the bishop of Sardis, and there may be some indication of Melito's connection with the Johannine community, given Polycrates' inclusion of Melito in his list of “great lights” of Asia.<sup>9</sup>

Among his extant corpus, *On Pascha* is the most significant work. The text is a sermon detailing the Christological typology of Exodus 12. His fragmentary writings, although frequently interrupted by lacunae, offer a rich and profound collection of Christian spirituality.<sup>10</sup> One of the consistent motifs in nearly all his writings is a high Christology that fully accords with the *Symbol of Chalcedon*. Indeed, when the synod claimed to have drawn upon “the holy fathers,” the reader would do well to assume that the spirit of Melito was lurking nearby. It should be noted that while Origen attributed corporealism to Melito,<sup>11</sup> his corpus refutes such a claim, as he attributes incorporeality to the Son before his incarnation.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Frag.* 14 (ANF 8:756). I am indebted to Hall's enumeration of the *Fragments* and his versification for *Peri Pascha* and *Frag. II*, although I have provided my own translations throughout this study. Stuart George Hall, ed., *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha and Fragments*, Oxford Early Christian Texts (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979). Where possible, I have provided the references to the *Anti-Nicene Fathers*.

<sup>5</sup> Eusebius, *Ecc. hist.* 5.24:5 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 1:242).

<sup>6</sup> Eusebius, *Ecc. hist.* 5:28:4 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 1:247).

<sup>7</sup> Eusebius, *Ecc. hist.* 5.24.1 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 1:242).

<sup>8</sup> See Alistair Stewart Sykes, “Melito's Anti-Judaism,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 5, no. 2 (1997): 275-79.

<sup>9</sup> Eusebius, *Ecc. hist.* 5.24.1 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 1:242); Alistair Stewart Sykes, *The Lamb's High Feast: Melito, Peri Pascha, and the Quartodeciman Paschal Liturgy at Sardis*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae (Leiden, NL: Brill, 1998), 11-12.

<sup>10</sup> See Hall, *Melito of Sardis*, xiii-xvii.

<sup>11</sup> Origen, “Selecta in Genesim” in Françoise Petit, ed., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, Series Graeca, vol. 12 (Leiden, NL: Brepols Pub., 1986), 73. Cf. *Cels.* 15, 21 (ANF 4:402, 404).

<sup>12</sup> *Frag.* 13; 14 (ANF 8:756). Cf. *New Frag.* II. Bugár persuasively argues that Origen's accusation is based on a misunderstanding of the title of *Frag.* 13. See István M. Bugár, “Melito and the Body” in Markus Vinzent, ed., *Studia Patristica: Vol. XCVI: Papers presented at the Seventeenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 2015*, vol. 22 (Leuven, NL: Peeters Pub., 2017), 308.

### III. The Christology of *On Pascha*

Melito viewed the risen Son as “by nature God and Man” (θεός ὡς φύσει καὶ ἄνθρωπος).<sup>13</sup> He is the “Alpha and Omega” who “sits at the Father’s right hand.”<sup>14</sup> The Son became man for the sake of the elect: “This is the one that was incarnated (σαρκόω) in a virgin, that was hanged on a tree.”<sup>15</sup> Christ preexisted in heaven and incarnated himself: “It is this one who, coming from heaven to earth for the sufferer, and clothing himself in the same through a virgin’s womb, and proceeding as a man, he received the pain of the sufferer.”<sup>16</sup> Melito viewed Christ as nothing less than the Creator and Sustainer of all things: The Son “formed (πλασσώ) man upon the earth,”<sup>17</sup> and gave humanity life.<sup>18</sup> The Son is he who “made heaven and earth.”<sup>19</sup> Whereas John noted that all the world’s books “could not contain” (χωρέω) all the things that Jesus did (John 21:25), Melito claimed that “Christ...has contained (χωρέω) all things.”<sup>20</sup>

### IV. The Christology of the *Fragments*

It is Christ who became man,<sup>21</sup> and while arrayed in human nature, he continued to sustain the world.<sup>22</sup> The Son “fashioned a body like ours,” and while he trod the earth, he occupied the heavens.<sup>23</sup> The Son was “carried in Mary’s womb,” and he was simultaneously “clothed with his Father.”<sup>24</sup> That is, the Son possessed the nature of his Father (cf. Phil. 2:6). The suffering of Jesus constituted “God” who “suffered by the right hand of an Israelite.”<sup>25</sup> The murder of Christ was the murder of Israel’s covenant God.<sup>26</sup> For Melito, Christ is God by nature and not adoption: “And because he was God and is God...this is the man who was sent by the Father to the world because he is God... both Man upon earth and God in heaven, and he is God over all creation.”<sup>27</sup> Christ is the Creator: the “former of man and who is all in all.”<sup>28</sup> He is eternal and immaterial according to his divine nature: “Though immaterial, he formed for himself a body of our own kind.”<sup>29</sup> Melito explained, “We are not worshippers of senseless stones, but we are worshippers of the only God who is before all and over all, and of his Christ who is God the Word before time.”<sup>30</sup> His characterization of Christ as “God the Word” implies the λόγος of John’s prologue is the personal and divine Son who preexisted his human conception.

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<sup>13</sup> *Peri Pascha* 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Peri Pascha* 105.

<sup>15</sup> *Peri Pascha* 70. Cf. vv. 100, 104.

<sup>16</sup> *Peri Pascha* 66.

<sup>17</sup> *Peri Pascha* 82.

<sup>18</sup> *Peri Pascha* 79.

<sup>19</sup> *Peri Pascha* 104.

<sup>20</sup> *Peri Pascha* 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Frag.* 13. Cf. *Frag.* 17; *New Frag.* II 4, 17.

<sup>22</sup> *Frag.* 14. Cf. Heb. 1:3.

<sup>23</sup> *Frag.* 14.

<sup>24</sup> *Frag.* 14.

<sup>25</sup> *Frag.* 7 (ANF 8:760).

<sup>26</sup> *Frag.* 7; cf. *Peri Pascha* 96.

<sup>27</sup> *New Frag.* II v. 22.

<sup>28</sup> *Frag.* 15.

<sup>29</sup> *Frag.* 14.

<sup>30</sup> *Frag.* 2 (ANF 8:759).

## V. Melito, the Socinian?

Tuggy claimed:

In *On Pascha*, section 82, he [i.e., Melito] refers to the *logos* as “The firstborn of God begotten before the morning star.” Right, he is a two-stage *logos* theorist. He thinks that when it was time to create, God emanated out this second and lesser divine being, and he had to create through the mediation of that being...<sup>31</sup>

Elsewhere, Tuggy defined “*logos* theorist:”

[For *logos* theorists] the Logos existed from all eternity as an attribute of God, and was only at a certain time, just before or at the time of God’s creation, expressed, so as to exist as another alongside God (cf. Proverbs 8), by means of whom God created the cosmos.<sup>32</sup>

Melito did not mention the *logos* in the relevant pericope but instead identified Christ as the “sovereign” who created Israel. Israel, wrote Melito, failed to “see God” unlike Jacob, and did not “recognize the Lord” (i.e., the Son of God; cf. Gen. 32:30; 35:1). Without meaningful interaction with the relevant passage or any attempt to substantiate his construal, Tuggy has attributed a concept entirely foreign for Melito, namely, that the Son (or Word) is merely an “attribute of God.” Melito *never* claimed that the Son was an attribute of God but God himself. He is the eternal and immutable Creator of all things.<sup>33</sup> The phrase “firstborn of God” (*πρωτότοκος τοῦ θεοῦ*) is indicative of Christ’s preeminence and not a title of subordination. That Melito calls Jesus “firstborn of God” within a context that attributes the entire creation to Jesus cannot be an indication that he is a creature. Rather, the Son is the one “who hung the earth” and “made the angels.” Moreover, while *πρωτότοκος* can take a chronological sense, the term is frequently used figuratively, referring “to having special status associated with a firstborn.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, when Yahweh said, “Israel is my firstborn son” (Exod. 4:22 LXX), he asserted that Israel receives all the preeminence and favor from God as if it were his firstborn son. This figurative use occurs again in the Septuagint’s rendering of Jeremiah 31:9, where Yahweh calls Ephraim (Joseph’s biologically firstborn was Manasseh) his “firstborn.” Yahweh said of King David, ‘And I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth’” (Ps. 89:27).<sup>35</sup> Therefore, Jesus, the true Israel and Son of David, is identified as “the firstborn of God” to recognize his preeminence (cf. Col. 1:15).

The phrase “begotten before the morning star” is a quotation from Psalm 109:3 LXX (110:3 MT).<sup>36</sup> This verse was used by Melito not as evidence of the Son’s finitude, but of his eternal generation before creation was made (cf. “Begotten of the Father before all worlds” in the *Nicene Creed*).<sup>37</sup> Melito posits both the eternality of the Son and his generation, just as with ancient writers of undisputed trinitarian

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<sup>31</sup> Dale Tuggy, “Rauser’s review of Is Jesus Human and not Divine?,” *Trinities*, September 14, 2020, podcast, <https://trinities.org/blog/podcast-303-rausers-review-of-is-jesus-human-and-not-divine/>.

<sup>32</sup> Dale Tuggy, “trinitarian or unitarian? 3 – Irenaeus’s 2-stage Logos theory,” *Trinities*, March 2, 2013, <https://trinities.org/blog/trinitarian-or-unitarian-3-irenaeuss-2-stage-logos-theory/>.

<sup>33</sup> *Frag.* 14 and 15 resp.

<sup>34</sup> William Arndt, W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 894. Melick observed that of the eight times *πρωτότοκος* occurs in the NT, “It is clearly used literally of primogeniture only once [i.e., Luke 2:7]. The rest of the occurrences are figurative, and they are far removed from any idea of birth.” Richard R. Melick Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1991), 216.

<sup>35</sup> Unless noted otherwise, all biblical citations from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

<sup>36</sup> For similar applications of this verse, see Clement of Alex, *Protr.* 9 (ANF 2:196); Athanasius, *Decr.* 3.13 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 4:158); Augustine, *Enarrat. Ps.* 59.10 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 8:543).

<sup>37</sup> “He [i.e., the Son] existed before the morning star...Creator of creatures.” *New Frag.* II v. 18. Cf. *Frag.* 15.

orthodoxy.<sup>38</sup> His use of the Psalm within the broader context of *On Pascha* implies a classical trinitarian hermeneutic, although he does not exposit the passage. Subsequently, Tuggy's assumption regarding Melito's use of the Psalm leads one to wonder whether he believes the psalmist is also a "two-stage *logos* theorist." After quoting *On Pascha* v. 104, Tuggy went on to assert, "[Melito] still distinguishes Jesus from the Father and the Father here is assumed to be the one true God."<sup>39</sup> Melito claimed that the Son was the one "through whom the Father did his works from the beginning to eternity."<sup>40</sup> That is, the Son is the instrumental agent through whom God brought about both creation and redemption. This sort of assertion is repeatedly made in the NT wherein the Son is described as the Father's agent in creation (e.g., 1 Cor. 8:6; cf John 1:3). For example, Hebrews 1:2 characterizes the Son as the one "through whom" the Father "created the universe."<sup>41</sup> The phrase δι' οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας uses a similar construction as in *On Pascha* v. 104 (δι' οὐ ἐποίησεν ὁ πατὴρ τὰ ἀπ' αρχῆς μέχρι αἰώνων), namely, διά with the genitive indicating the Son's personal agency in the creation of all things.<sup>42</sup> Tuggy assumed a unitarian reading of Melito from the outset, despite his claim to the eternality and creatorship of the Son.

*Fragment 2* states: "We are not worshipers of stones which have no understanding but we are worshippers of the only God, who is before all things and over all things, and his Christ who is the God the Word before the ages..." Of this passage, Tuggy claimed: "[On Melito's view] God is before all, including the *logos*. God is overall, including the *logos*. When he is talking about the only God here, he is talking about the Father; so he is a unitarian subordinationist."<sup>43</sup> Instead of attempting to substantiate his claim by providing any explanation of how Melito could affirm that Christ is both God and man by nature, or how he could assert that the death of Christ was the murder of God, Tuggy has read subordinationism into the relevant passage. Melito claimed the Son is the Creator of all things and is thus before all created things (cf. John 1:3): "[Christ] made all things,"<sup>44</sup> "He is God over all creation."<sup>45</sup> Further, if *Fragment 6* is from Melito's hand, he explicitly claimed the Son to be the eternal true God: "[The Son is the] true God existing before time" (ἀληθής θεὸς προαιώνιος ὑπάρχων).<sup>46</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

Melito's writings present an ancient example of orthodox trinitarian Christology. Despite the clarity, repetition, and force with which Melito communicated the eternal deity of the Son, Tuggy has sought to recast Melito's Christology to accord with unitarianism. With transparency, Tuggy has sought to achieve

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<sup>38</sup> E.g., Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 30.19 (*NPNF<sup>2</sup>* 7:316); Augustine, *Trin.* 15.47 (*NPNF<sup>1</sup>* 3:225).

<sup>39</sup> Tuggy, "Podcast 303: Rauser's review of Is Jesus Human and not Divine?," *Trinities*.

<sup>40</sup> *Peri Pascha*, v. 104.

<sup>41</sup> Within the Second Temple period, αἰών frequently functions as a metonym for κόσμος and thus the translations "universe" (ESV, NIV) or "worlds" (KJV; LSB; NRSV) (cf. Matt. 13:22; Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 4:4; Heb. 11:3; Wis. 14:6). See William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 33; T. Holtz, "αἰών" in Horst Robert Balz, Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990), 46; M. R. Burgos, "A Diversity of Failures: A Critical Evaluation of Subordinationist Interpretations of Hebrews 1:10-12," *Global Journal of Arts Humanity and Social Sciences* 3, no. 7 (2023): 830, n. 3.

<sup>42</sup> William Arndt, W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 225. See also Moisés Silva, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 689; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 164.

<sup>43</sup> Tuggy, "Podcast 303: Rauser's review of Is Jesus Human and not Divine?," *Trinities*.

<sup>44</sup> *New Frag.* II v. 20.

<sup>45</sup> *New Frag.* II, v. 23.

<sup>46</sup> *Frag.* 6. Cf. 1 John 5:20. Hall, *Melito of Sardis*, xxxi.

this end by imposing foreign theological concepts on Melito and by mischaracterizing his writings. Despite his confident insistence, Tuggy's contention is mitigated by a perfunctory reading of Melito's works.

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