

# Athanasius

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## Series Preface

Recent decades have witnessed a growing desire among Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants to engage and retrieve the exegetical, theological, and doctrinal resources of the early church. If the affirmations of the first four councils constitute a common inheritance for ecumenical Christian witness, then in the Nicene Creed Christians find a particularly rich vein for contemporary exploration of the realities of faith. These fruits of the patristic period were, as the fathers themselves repeatedly attest, the embodiment of a personally and ecclesially engaged exegetical, theological, and metaphysical approach to articulating the Christian faith. In the Foundations of Theological Exegesis and Christian Spirituality series, we will explore this patristic witness to our common Nicene faith.

Each volume of the present series explores how biblical exegesis, dogmatic theology, and participatory metaphysics relate in the thought of a particular church father. In addition to serving as introductions to the theological world of the fathers, the volumes of the series break new ecumenical and theological ground by taking as their starting point three related convictions. First, at the core of the Foundations series lies the conviction that *ressourcement*, or retrieval, of the shared inheritance of the Nicene faith is an important entry point to all ecumenical endeavor. Nicene Christianity, which received its authoritative shape at the councils of Constantinople (381) and Chalcedon (451), was the result of more than three centuries of ecclesial engagement with the implications of the incarnation and of the adoration of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the liturgy of the church. Particularly since the 1940s, when Catholic scholars such as Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, and others reached back to the church fathers for inspiration and contemporary cultural and ecclesial renewal, *ressourcement* has made significant contributions to theological development and ecumenical discussion. The last few decades have also witnessed growing evangelical interest in an approach to the church fathers that reads them

not only for academic reasons but also with a view to giving them a voice in today's discussions. Accordingly, this series is based on the conviction that a contemporary retrieval of the church fathers is essential also to the flourishing and further development of Christian theology.

Second, since the Nicene consensus was based on a thorough engagement with the Scriptures, renewed attention to the exegetical approaches of the church fathers is an important aspect of *ressourcement*. In particular, the series works on the assumption that Nicene theology was the result of the early church's conviction that historical and spiritual interpretation of the Scriptures were intimately connected and that both the Old and the New Testaments speak of the realities of Christ, of the church, and of eternal life in fellowship with the Triune God. Although today we may share the dogmatic inheritance of the Nicene faith regardless of our exegetical approach, it is much less clear that the Nicene convictions—such as the doctrines of the Trinity and of the person of Christ—can be sustained without the spiritual approaches to interpretation that were common among the fathers. Doctrine, after all, is the outcome of biblical interpretation. Thus, theological renewal requires attention to the way in which the church fathers approached Scripture. Each of the volumes of this series will therefore explore a church father's theological approach(es) to the biblical text.

Finally, it is our conviction that such a *ressourcement* of spiritual interpretation may contribute significantly toward offsetting the fragmentation—ecclesial, moral, economical, and social—of contemporary society. This fragmentation is closely connected to the loss of the Platonic-Christian synthesis of Nicene Christianity. Whereas this earlier synthesis recognized a web of relationships as a result of God's creative act in and through Christ, many today find it much more difficult to recognize, or even to pursue, common life together. A participatory metaphysic, which many of the church fathers took as axiomatic, implies that all of created reality finds its point of mutual connection in the eternal Word of God, in which it lies anchored. It is this christological anchor that allows for the recognition of a common origin and a common end, and thus for shared commitments. While the modern mind-set tends to separate nature and the supernatural (often explicitly excluding the latter), Nicene Christianity recognized that the created order exists by virtue of God's graciously allowing it to participate, in a creaturely fashion, in his goodness, truth, and beauty as revealed in Christ through the Spirit. A participatory metaphysic, therefore, is one of the major presuppositions of the creed's articulation of the realities of faith.

In short, rooted in the wisdom of the Christian past, the volumes of the series speak from the conviction that the above-mentioned convictions informed the life and work of the church fathers and that these convictions are in need of *ressourcement* for the sake of today's theological, philosophical, and exegetical debates. In light of a growing appreciation of the early Christians, the series

aims to publish erudite introductions that will be of interest in seminary and university courses on doctrine and biblical exegesis and that will be accessible to educated lay readers with interest in how early Christians appropriated and passed on divine revelation.

Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering, series editors

# Introduction

## *Scripture and Metaphysics (in the Augustinian Mode)*

What is the nature of things? What are things, ultimately and in their most basic structures and essence? You, O Lord, know, for you made them all, sustain them all in existence, direct and guide all things to your good ends. You know every thing, love every thing, are good to every thing. You know them all more nearly than they know themselves. But how shall *we* know?

Should I even ask, O Lord? Should I even ask? You have spoken, and you have acted, and you have called us to believe. You have taught us that we walk by faith and not by sight, by trust in your good promises of goodness, and not by understanding. It is enough that you know the nature of things. Should I ask?

If I ask, will I receive an answer? You are beyond all my thoughts, greater than all that I can say, incomprehensible in your eternal communion as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You cannot be encompassed with any concept, bounded by anything greater than yourself, since you are greater than all. All my efforts to encompass you are acts of idolatry and not true worship. And you made all things and all things shine with the bright radiance of your glory. Your world seems as incomprehensible as you yourself.

Should I even ask? Can I ask? Dare I ask?

Have not some of your servants turned to such idols? Have they not bound you in forms and substances and concepts of their own imagining and bowed to worship what their own hands have made? Have they not turned your glory, the glory of the incorruptible God, into idols more ethereal than four-footed beasts and crawling creatures, and worshiped and served the creature rather than you, their Creator? Have not your servants all but denied that you were Creator, following vain philosophers who spoke of eternal matter and changeless forms? Have they not said that you are subject to time and development,

denying that you are eternally complete and fulfilled? Have they not danced and sung before other gods? They asked, what is the nature of things? And were they not turned from your ways?

Dare I ask?

Yet, I cannot escape the question, for others have spoken before me. Others have asked, what is the nature of things? and have given answers. Are their answers true? Should I, O Lord, ignore their questions and answers and devote myself to prayer and service to the poor? Or shall I seek to answer? Shall I seek to determine if they speak the truth? How can I not? Can I tell whether their answers are true without asking the same questions? If a philosopher says that all things exist by participation in forms, should I, O Lord, believe him? If another says that matter is eternal, shall I, O Lord, accept that? If yet another says that all substances are informed matter, shall I receive that? If another says that we can know nothing of things beyond their phenomenal appearances, what shall I say? If the philosophers are correct about the nature of things, do they also describe your nature, O God? Are you one of the things whose nature these philosophers describe?

If you would not have me believe these philosophers, I would know why. And if they are false, I would know what truth to speak in place of their falsehoods.

Blessed be God. You have not been silent but have spoken too about the nature of things. You have said that in the beginning you made the heavens and the earth, and all that is in them. You warn that we do not know the activity of God who makes all things, just as we do not know the path of the wind or how bones take shape in the womb. You give to all life and breath and all things. You cause all things to work together for good to those who love you. You have said that you were with your Word in the beginning, your Word that is God and yet also with God, and that you made all things through this Word, so that nothing is made without him. You have said that he is the light that lightens every man, the light that shines in all that you have made. You have said that in you we all “live and move and have our being.” You have said that Christ is before all things and that in him all things consist, and that you will put all things under his feet, and that you will sum up all things in Christ, who fills all things. You have handed over all things to your Son, even judgment and life, and all things are put in subjection under him. You have given us the Spirit of your Son, the Spirit that “searches all things, even the depths of God.” You have promised that at the end you will be all in all, and you have taught us to receive all things with thanks.

What is the nature of things? Can I say more than this, O Lord, that from you and through you and to you are all things? Need I say more? Dare I?

This is what you taught your servant, Athanasius. You taught him that exploring the nature of things was exploring the truth that is Jesus the Christ. You taught him concerning the eternal Word, who is your living will and your eternal “plan,” the radiance of your glory, the river of living water that flows

from you, the never-barren fountain. You taught him that you were never speechless or without reason. You taught him that every created thing, and all the rationality, pattern, and harmony of things, comes from that Word. You taught him that when we look rightly at your creation, we look not at a portrait of some unnamed and unnamable God but at the traces of your Logos. You taught him that everything shines with glory, and the glory is the eternal radiance that is the eternal light that is the Father. Human beings are *logikos*, rational, but you showed Athanasius that we are so because we are made in the image of your Logos. You taught your servant Athanasius that when the world descended into corruption and the image of God was tarnished, when death dragged the human race toward the grave, your living Logos became man to transform creation from the inside, to overcome death on the cross and to rise again so that your light might shine within and through our flesh. You showed Athanasius that through your incarnate Son and Spirit, you are forming new, stable human beings, a deified human society, where death and the fear of death are overcome.

You taught your servant Athanasius that Christ unites Scripture and all things, for Scripture, as much as the world and human existence and history, is all about Christ. Scripture everywhere teaches about Christ. His life, death, and resurrection are the hinge on which the drama of Scripture turns, and you taught Athanasius to find shadows of Christ in the Old Testament, shadows that break forth in light with the fulfillment of the New. And you taught that Christ is the pattern not only for the Scriptures but for all things. You taught Athanasius that Christ impresses his form on Old Testament institutions and persons, and that those forms are revealed in their fullness when he manifests himself in the flesh. You taught him to see that same pattern within creation, for the Logos is the exemplar of created reality as he is of Scripture.

Through your servant, you have taught us metaphysics as “christic metaphysics,” which we might also call “typological” metaphysics—just as we can call his interpretation of the Scriptures with equal justice both “christic” and “typological.”

What is the nature of things? What is ultimately true of things? Shall we listen to Athanasius, O God? Shall our final answer be not forms, and substances, and hylomorphic unions, and possibility and actuality, but finally only this: from eternity to the eschaton, it is all about Christ?

Is that not the answer to my questions, O Father? Is that not the sum of all questions about Scripture and metaphysics? How could I speak more or other than the Word that is the first Word and the last, the beginning and the end, Alpha and Omega?

Should I say more? Dare I?

# 1

## Evangelizing Metaphysics

### Battle in Alexandria

Even before the controversy over Arius broke out around 318, the church scene in fourth-century Alexandria, Egypt, was tumultuous. Escaping the Diocletianic persecution (c. 303), Bishop Peter of Alexandria had fled from his city more than once.<sup>1</sup> During one of his absences, one Melitius found the city bereft of pastoral care and promptly ordained some men to fill the vacuum. Peter returned and wondered what had happened to his bishopric. It was the beginning of what we now know as the Melitian schism.

In part, this was another battle, like the Donatist schism to the West, about the proper response to persecution, and the question was whether to encourage or discourage what some regarded as the imprudent zeal of voluntary martyrs. Peter, like the anti-Donatist Bishop Mensurius of Carthage, urged moderation and was mild toward those who lapsed by offering sacrifice to the emperor; Melitius was of Donatist stripe. In Alexandria, the division was so acute that, according to legend, Peter and Melitius were not even able to cooperate when they were, ironically, forced to share a prison cell. Peter hung a curtain down the middle of the cell and urged his supporters to remain on his side of the curtain.<sup>2</sup>

Despite his prudent escapes, Peter died a martyr in 311. Achillas briefly followed him as bishop, but he soon died, and Alexander was installed in 313. Sometime around 318, he and a local priest, Arius, came into conflict over Christology. Ancient church historians give differing accounts of the origins of the controversy, but the most likely explanation is that of Socrates, who recorded that Arius objected to a sermon of Alexander that so stressed the

unity of Father and Son that it seemed to verge toward the Sabellian or modalist heresy by denying distinctions among the persons.<sup>3</sup>

A charismatic preacher, Arius was tall, stooped, and curved—as one ancient historian put it—like a snake. He wore the garb of an ascetic and a philosopher and oversaw a large number of devoted virgins within the Alexandrian church. He had a reputation as an acute logician. Possibly a student of Lucian of Antioch (as Arius’s ally Eusebius of Nicomedia definitely was), Arius was in some respects a traditional Alexandrian theologian. Like Clement and Origen, the great Alexandrian theologians of the previous centuries, Arius was devoted to more speculative theology and taught mainly a small band of devoted disciples. He was not, like Alexander, responsible for a large congregation of lay believers. The conflict between the two is in part a conflict of different theological styles: catholic versus academic.<sup>4</sup>

Arius aligned with Origen in another respect too. On the issues that came to the forefront in the Arian controversy, Origen’s position was ambiguous. On the one hand, Origen taught that the Son was eternally and timelessly generated by the Father, but on the other hand, he implied that the Son was secondary and ontologically subordinate to the Father. Arius joined with Origen in stressing the subordination of the Son to the Father, but unlike Origen, Arius cut through the ambiguity and denied the eternal generation of the Son.<sup>5</sup>

Arius’s precise views are hard to come by. Very few of his writings still exist in complete form, and we are, in the main, forced to rely on his opponents, mainly Athanasius, who quoted fragments and often put them in the worst possible light. Yet several of Arius’s basic ideas and emphases can be reconstructed. One of the few extant works from his own hand is a letter to Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia, in which he complains that he is being persecuted for teaching that the Logos exists “by will and counsel,” that “before he was begotten, or created, or determined, or established, he did not exist,” and that he “derives from non-existence” (*ex ouk ontōn estin*).<sup>6</sup> To be sure, the Logos is not a creature as other creatures are, but neither is he unbegotten, since there can be only one unbegotten, the Father.<sup>7</sup>

Another letter to Alexander, preserved by Athanasius in his treatise *On the Synods*, provides a fuller explanation of Arius’s viewpoint. Claiming that he is only summarizing the “faith from our forefathers,”<sup>8</sup> Arius confesses “One God, alone Ingenerate, alone Everlasting, alone Unbegun, alone True, alone having Immortality, alone Wise, alone Good, alone Sovereign, Judge, Governor, and Providence of all, unalterable and unchangeable, just and good.” The repeated “alone” is revealing, since it highlights Arius’s claim that he is confessing the “one God” of Scripture, which, in his view, necessarily excludes any notion of a Son who is, “along with” God, ingenerate, everlasting, unbegun, true, immortal, wise, good. He claims to be worshiping the “God of Law and Prophets and New Testament,” a God who “begot an Only-begotten Son before eternal times,” through whom he made all things. This Son is begotten

“not in semblance but in truth,” and this means that God “made Him subsist at His own will, unalterable and unchangeable” as a “perfect creature of God, but not as one of the creatures” and as “offspring, but not as one of the things begotten.” Carefully distancing himself from earlier heretics—he names the gnostic Valentinus, the Manicheans, and Sabellius among others—he describes the view of the Son that he and his allies (“we”) held.

For when giving to him [the Son] the inheritance of all things [Heb. 1:2], the Father did not deprive himself of what he has without beginning in himself; for he is the source of all things. Thus there are three subsisting realities [*hypostaseis*]. And God, being the cause of all that happens, is absolutely alone without beginning; but the Son, begotten apart from time by the Father, and created [*ktistheis*] and founded before the ages, was not in existence before his generation, but was begotten apart from time before all things, and he alone came into existence [*hypestē*] from the Father. For he is neither eternal nor co-eternal nor co-unbegotten with the Father, nor does he have his being together with the Father, as some speak of relations, introducing two unbegotten beginnings. But God is before all things as monad and beginning of all. Therefore he is also before the Son, as we have learned also from your public preaching in the church. (*On the Synods 16*)<sup>9</sup>

Arius also summarized his views in a poem, known as the *Thalia*, whose original form is notoriously difficult to reconstruct. Athanasius provides two summaries of Arius’s beliefs, which he claims are taken from Arius’s own writings. Some quotations are from the *Thalia*, but scholars still puzzle over whether Athanasius is quoting verbatim or slicing a few juicy pieces from the work.<sup>10</sup> The first is found in Athanasius’s treatise *On the Synods* and bears the heading “The Blasphemies of Arius”:<sup>11</sup>

God Himself then, in His own nature, is ineffable by all men. Equal or like Himself He alone has none, or one in glory. And Ingenerate we call Him, because of Him who is generate by nature. We praise Him as without beginning because of Him who has a beginning. And adore Him as everlasting, because of Him who in time has come to be. The Unbegun made the Son a beginning of things originated; and advanced Him as a Son to Himself by adoption. He has nothing proper to God in proper subsistence. For He is not equal, no, nor one in essence with Him. Wise is God, for He is the teacher of Wisdom. There is full proof that God is invisible to all beings; both to things which are through the Son, and to the Son He is invisible. I will say it expressly, how by the Son is seen the Invisible; by that power by which God sees, and in His own measure, the Son endures to see the Father, as is lawful. Thus there is a Triad, not in equal glories. Not intermingling with each other are their subsistences. One more glorious than the other in their glories unto immensity. Foreign from the Son in essence is the Father, for He is without beginning. Understand that the Monad was; but the Dyad was not, before it was in existence. It follows at once

that, though the Son was not, the Father was God. Hence the Son, not being (for He existed at the will of the Father), is God Only-begotten, and He is alien from either. Wisdom existed as Wisdom by the will of the Wise God. Hence He is conceived in numberless conceptions: Spirit, Power, Wisdom, God's glory, Truth, Image, and Word. Understand that He is conceived to be Radiance and Light. One equal to the Son, the Superior is able to beget; but one more excellent, or superior, or greater, He is not able. At God's will the Son is what and whatsoever He is. And when and since He was, from that time He has subsisted from God. He, being a strong God, praises in His degree the Superior. To speak in brief, God is ineffable to His Son. For He is to Himself what He is, that is, unspeakable. So that nothing which is called comprehensible does the Son know to speak about; for it is impossible for Him to investigate the Father, who is by Himself. For the Son does not know His own essence, for, being Son, He really existed, at the will of the Father. What argument then allows, that He who is from the Father should know His own parent by comprehension? For it is plain that for that which has a beginning to conceive how the Unbegun is, or to grasp the idea, is not possible. (*On the Synods* 15)

Early in the first of his *Discourses against the Arians* (sometimes known as *Orations against the Arians*), Athanasius cites a collection of fragments. Mocking Arius's "effeminate" meter and tone,<sup>12</sup> he quotes Arius's claim to be summarizing the "faith of God's elect" that he has learned from "partakers of wisdom," so that he might be "accomplished, divinely taught, and wise in all things." Athanasius follows with a catena of "repulsive and irreligious" teachings:

"God was not always a Father"; but "once God was alone, and not yet a Father, but afterwards He became a Father." "The Son was not always"; for, whereas all things were made out of nothing, and all existing creatures and works were made, so the Word of God Himself was "made out of nothing," and "once He was not," and "He was not before His origination," but He as others "had an origin of creation." "For God," he says, "was alone, and the Word as yet was not, nor the Wisdom. Then, wishing to form us, thereupon He made a certain one, and named Him Word and Wisdom and Son, that He might form us by means of Him." Accordingly, he says that there are two wisdoms, first, the attribute co-existent with God, and next, that in this wisdom the Son was originated, and was only named Wisdom and Word as partaking of it. "For Wisdom," says he, "by the will of the wise God, had its existence in Wisdom." In like manner, he says, that there is another Word in God besides the Son, and that the Son again, as partaking of it, is named Word and Son according to grace. And this too is an idea proper to their heresy, as shown in other works of theirs, that there are many powers; one of which is God's own by nature and eternal; but that Christ, on the other hand, is not the true power of God; but, as others, one of the so-called powers, one of which, namely, the locust and the caterpillar, is called in Scripture, not merely the power, but the "great power." The others are many and are like the Son, and of them David speaks

in the Psalms, when he says, “The Lord of hosts” or “powers.” And by nature, as all others, so the Word Himself is alterable, and remains good by His own free will, while He chooses; when, however, He wills, He can alter as we can, as being of an alterable nature. For “therefore,” says he, “as foreknowing that He would be good, did God by anticipation bestow on Him this glory, which afterwards, as man, He attained from virtue. Thus in consequence of His works fore-known, did God bring it to pass that He being such, should come to be.” (*Discourses* 1.5)

Rowan Williams provides one of the most careful and charitable summaries of Arius’s theology. For Arius, “God alone is self-subsistent” and does not have “any kind of plurality or composition.” Because he is not eternally and intrinsically related, “He is entirely free, rational and purposive.” To create the world, he freely and voluntarily brings “the Son into being, as a subsistent individual truly [*alēthōs*] distinct from himself.” Though this occurs “before all ages,” yet, in a sense, “the Father exists prior to the Son, since the Son is not eternal, that is, not timelessly self-subsistent.” The Son remains what he was created to be, “a perfect creature,” and as such he receives “all the gifts and glories God can give him.”<sup>13</sup>

## The Councils Begin

Alarmed not only at Arius’s teaching but also at his popularity, Bishop Alexander summoned a synod of one hundred Egyptian bishops, who roundly condemned Arius. Banished from the city, Arius journeyed to Nicomedia, where he knew he would gain a sympathetic hearing from the powerful Eusebius, an intimate of Constantia, the wife of the eastern emperor Licinius and sister of Constantine. Arius had chosen a good ally. Eusebius summoned a council in Bithynia, which reversed the decision of the Egyptian council by finding Arius orthodox.<sup>14</sup> Another council was held at Caesarea, presumably headed by another Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea and author of the first *Church History*, and this too found Arius innocent of heresy, though it recommended that he return to Alexandria to attempt a reconciliation with his bishop. Arius returned, but reconciliation did not happen; instead, Arius’s presence in Alexandria only provoked further quarreling. Meanwhile, a council held in Antioch condemned and excommunicated Eusebius of Caesarea in 324.<sup>15</sup>

Resolution of the controversy was made more difficult by Licinius’s prohibition of Christian assemblies in 322 (which may have been a response to the controversy), and so it was not until Constantine took over the East in 324 that the bishops could safely meet to resolve the question. Constantine’s inclination was to settle the dispute by negotiation. He rapidly dispatched his advisor Ossius to Alexandria, bearing an imperial letter, but Ossius found

the situation far worse than he had expected. Soon after his mission failed, Constantine summoned the bishops of East and West, together with several from outside the empire, first to Ancyra, and then to Nicaea, to put the issue to rest once and for all. It was the first ecumenical council in the history of the church.

Athanasius was thrust into this controversy in his early adulthood.<sup>16</sup> Born sometime between 295 and 299 into a pagan household in Alexandria, Athanasius rose to prominence as a young man. According to legend, Alexander found Athanasius on the beach playing bishop with his friends on the anniversary of the martyrdom of the previous bishop, Peter, and Alexander “construed the coincidence as an omen and took the boys into his household to give them an education.”<sup>17</sup> Under Alexander’s tutelage, Athanasius received a smattering of classical education, but the focus of his training was on Scripture.<sup>18</sup> As Gregory Nazianzen describes it in his oration in praise of Athanasius,

He was brought up, from the first, in religious habits and practices, after a brief study of literature and philosophy, so that he might not be utterly unskilled in such subjects, or ignorant of matters which he had determined to despise. For his generous and eager soul could not brook being occupied in vanities, like unskilled athletes, who beat the air instead of their antagonists and lose the prize. From meditating on every book of the Old and New Testament, with a depth such as none else has applied even to one of them, he grew rich in contemplation, rich in splendor of life, combining them in wondrous sort by that golden bond which few can weave; using life as the guide of contemplation, contemplation as the seal of life. For the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and, so to say, its first swathing band; but, when wisdom has burst the bonds of fear and risen up to love, it makes us friends of God, and sons instead of bondsmen. (*Oration 21.6*)<sup>19</sup>

Though he was able to use the philosophy he knew in anti-pagan apologetics and anti-Arian polemics, Athanasius remained throughout his life mainly a Bible teacher, his most basic convictions, passions, instincts, beliefs, and views shaped not by Plotinus or Stoicism but by Scripture.

Athanasius’s life was one of epic proportions—a biblical epic, to be precise. He consistently viewed his opponents and his circumstances through the lenses of the biblical narratives that he had learned so thoroughly at the feet of Alexander. For example, he opens an encyclical letter describing the circumstances of the Alexandrian church with a lengthy comparison to the account of the Levite and the concubine in Judges 19–21. “My object,” he writes, “in reminding you of this history is this, that you may compare those ancient transactions with what has happened to us now, and perceiving how much these last exceed the other in cruelty, may be filled with greater indignation on account of them, than were the people of old against those offenders.” In his view, “the calamity of the Levite was but small, when compared with the enormities which have now

been committed against the Church.” In fact, “such deeds as these were never before heard of in the whole world, or the like experienced by any one.” In the time of the judges, “it was but a single woman that was injured, and one Levite who suffered wrong,” but “now the whole Church is injured, the priesthood insulted, and worst of all, piety is persecuted by impiety.” Then, “the tribes were astounded, each at the sight of part of the body of one woman; but now the members of the whole Church are seen divided from one another, and are sent abroad some to you, and some to others, bringing word of the insults and injustice which they have suffered.” He ends the analogy by exhorting his readers to throw themselves into the battle, “lest shortly ecclesiastical Canons, and the faith of the Church be corrupted. For both are in danger, unless God shall speedily by your hands amend what has been done amiss, and the Church be avenged on her enemies” (*Encyclical Letter 1*).

Defending the onetime bishop of Alexandria, Dionysius, against the charge of Arianism, Athanasius compares the Arians to the nations of Psalm 2 that take counsel against the Lord and against his anointed (*On the Opinion of Dionysius 1*). In a later letter to the bishops of Egypt, he styles the Arians as the false teachers of Jesus’s Olivet Discourse (*Letter to the Bishops of Egypt 1.1*; cf. Matt. 24:11, 24), and charges that the heretics are fools who build on sand (*Bishops of Egypt 1.4*; Matt. 7:26–27). He invokes the examples of Achan and Saul, both of whom seized Yahweh’s plunder: “As it is written in the Book of Joshua the son of Nun, when Achan was charged with theft, he did not excuse himself with the plea of his zeal in the wars; but being convicted of the offense was stoned by all the people (Josh. 7). And when Saul was charged with negligence and a breach of the law, he did not benefit his cause by alleging his conduct on other matters (1 Sam. 15). For a defense on one count will not operate to obtain an acquittal on another count” (*Bishops of Egypt 1.11*).

He frequently compares the Arians to the Jews who opposed Jesus. Arian doubts about the incarnation make them similar to the views of the high priest Caiaphas, who found Jesus guilty of blasphemy (*Discourses 3.27*). The Arians are like Judas, betraying God, though they attempt to hide their treachery (*Discourses 3.28*). On their premises, Athanasius argues, the body that the Son assumes promotes the Son, rather than being promoted by the Son, a conclusion that Athanasius denounces as “Jewish” (*Discourses 3.39*). Arians consider the body of the Son, along with the body’s passions, and conclude that the Son is less than the impassible Father (*Discourses 3.35*). Arian arguments against the Son imply an attack on the Father, and these are Judaic: “Cease then, O abhorred of God, and degrade not the Word; nor detract from His Godhead, which is the Father’s, as though He needed or were ignorant; lest ye be casting your own arguments against the Christ, as the Jews who once stoned Him. For these belong not to the Word, as the Word” (*Discourses 3.41*). Arians are “unthankful Jews” (*Discourses 3.55*).

## Athanasius and the Arians

Whatever his original connection with Alexander, Athanasius had by 325 become a deacon in the Alexandrian church and went with the bishop as a secretary at the Council of Nicaea. Again, later legend embellished his role. Despite his youth, Alexander probably relied on him as a theological expert, but he did not dominate the proceedings of the council by any means.

Alexander died on April 17, 328, and Athanasius was elected bishop on May 9, in an election that was later challenged as shady and underhanded. Some claimed that Athanasius was too young to be elected, under the required age of thirty. As bishop, Athanasius became the focal point of the ecclesiastical politics of Alexandria, the largest church in Egypt and one of the major churches of the East. His duties brought him into regular contact with the new Christian emperor, Constantine. If the emperor's relations with Alexander were strained, his spars with Athanasius threw off sparks. Both were domineering personalities—Athanasius, for all his reputation for piety and theological acumen, was a tough, skillful infighter, a community organizer and rabble-rouser, willing to use intimidation or other tools in pursuit of his aims. Above all, the clash was one between an emperor whose main hope for the church was peaceful concord and a bishop who wanted no part of a consensus not based on truth.<sup>20</sup>

Constantine had been working to reconcile Arius to the Alexandrian church since the Council of Nicaea, and once Athanasius was made bishop, Constantine renewed those efforts. When Athanasius refused, Constantine threatened to depose him. The situation was exacerbated by the side conflict between Athanasius and the Melitians, who accused Athanasius of trying to impose a levy on Egyptian linen, and of bribery and sacrilege. The latter charge rested on allegations about the actions of one of the bishop's agents, Macarius. The Melitians claimed that Macarius burst in on Ischyras—whose right to priestly office Athanasius contested—while Ischyras was celebrating Mass, overturned the altar, burned a book, and broke a eucharistic chalice.<sup>21</sup> Hoping to stamp down that fight, Constantine summoned bishops to Nicomedia in 332, where Athanasius produced a letter in which Ischyras admitted that the charge was false. Athanasius was exonerated, but the Melitian bishops were not satisfied with the outcome and appealed again to Constantine, repeating the charge that Athanasius was responsible for breaking the chalice and adding a charge that Athanasius had murdered a man named Arsenius. A burnt hand was produced as evidence, allegedly the only surviving limb of Arsenius. At another council in Antioch, the story goes, Athanasius produced Arsenius, who had been hiding in a monastery, and the charges were again dropped.<sup>22</sup>

Arius was still eager to be vindicated, and he found allies among the Melitians. In 334, Constantine called yet another council, this one at Caesarea. Athanasius refused to attend, and Constantine backed down. The following

year, the bishops assembled at Tyre, Athanasius among them, and he again had to answer the charge of breaking the sacred chalice. In the meantime, Ischyras had retracted his retraction and added the claim that Athanasius had imprisoned him on the false charge that he, Ischyras, had stoned a statue of the emperor. Five other Melitian bishops complained that they had been flogged on orders from the bishop of Alexandria. Recognizing that the council was set against him, Athanasius slipped away one night in disguise and was condemned by the council in absentia.<sup>23</sup>

Athanasius sailed to Constantinople, where he confronted the emperor in disguise, in one of the most dramatic scenes in this series of events. Constantine recalled,

As I was making my entry into the city which bears our name, in this our most flourishing home, Constantinople—and it happened that I was riding on horseback at the time—suddenly the Bishop Athanasius, with certain ecclesiastics whom he had around him, presented himself so unexpectedly in our path, as to produce an occasion of consternation. For the Omniscient God is my witness that at first sight I did not recognize him until some of my attendants, in answer to my enquiry, informed me, as was very natural, both who he was, and what injustice he had suffered. At that time indeed I neither conversed, nor held any communication with him. But as he repeatedly entreated an audience, and I had not only refused it, but almost ordered that he should be removed from my presence, he said with greater boldness, that he petitioned for nothing more than that you might be summoned hither, in order that in our presence, he, driven by necessity to such a course, might have a fair opportunity afforded him of complaining of his wrongs.<sup>24</sup>

Constantine was persuaded and dashed off a blistering condemnation of the proceedings at Tyre. Within a few days, a delegation of Athanasius's enemies arrived in Constantinople to see the emperor, including Eusebius of Caesarea and Eusebius of Nicomedia, and they persuaded the emperor to reverse himself. The bishop of Alexandria was not deposed, but he was suspended from exercising his duties as a bishop, and he was exiled—for the first but not the last time—to Trier.<sup>25</sup>

### *Contra Mundum*

In the Easter letter written as he was leaving for his exile, Athanasius again exhibited his penchant for reading his life through biblical categories. He assured the people of Alexandria that his tribulations were consistent with what the apostle Paul had predicted about the life of Christians (Rom. 12:12). He cited Psalm 119:143, “Though afflictions and anguish have come upon me, your commandments are my meditations,” and took comfort in the beatitude that

Jesus promised to the persecuted, finding assurance in the fact that “affliction shall not befall every man in this world, but only for those who have a holy fear of Him” (*Festal Letter* 11.12). As usual, Athanasius turned the occasion into an anti-Arian polemic. Since the Arians did not worship the incarnate eternal God, they could not take assurance from the resurrection. Like all the orthodox, Athanasius was a servant of the risen Son of God and therefore knew that death held no power. He went into exile without fear.

Arius, meanwhile, continued his appeals to the emperor. He professed to accept the orthodox faith in a letter to Constantine, and Constantine, ever eager to reunite the church, accepted his profession. It was not to be. Reportedly while on his way to church to be readmitted, he suffered a bizarre death, perhaps by poisoning, in what James Joyce called a “Greek watercloset” where “with beaded mitre and with crozier, stalled upon his throne, widower of a widowed see, with uplifted omophorion” he died “with clotted hinderparts.”<sup>26</sup> According to later sources, no one used the seat again for some time, and it is said that Theodosius set up a statue of Arius in Alexandria so that the citizens could amuse themselves, and affirm their orthodoxy, by spattering it with feces and urine.<sup>27</sup> Athanasius found Arius’s end entirely fitting, an act of divine justice. Arius was a Judas, and so it was right that he die by “being burst asunder” (*History of the Arians* 7.51; cf. Acts 1:18).

The controversy over Arius’s views did not end with the heretic’s death any more than it ended with Nicaea. If anything, the debate intensified. Many of the most dramatic events of Athanasius’s life and ministry took place after Arius’s death. When Constantine died in 337, his three sons, Constantinus (Constantine II), Constans, and Constantius, agreed to recall exiled bishops to their sees. Athanasius returned to Alexandria during that year and resumed his position as bishop. His enemies were far from satisfied, and soon they brought the old charges against Athanasius before the emperors, adding the claim that he was “personally appropriating funds that were generated by the sale of wheat and intended for the benefit of widows.”<sup>28</sup> Athanasius fought back, convening a council in Egypt that produced a circular letter in his defense, and traveling to Cappadocia to appear before Constantius. He enlisted the help of the already famed hermit Antony, who traveled from the desert mountains to Alexandria to silence supporters of Arius who claimed Antony took their side of the debate:

Having entered Alexandria, he denounced the Arians, saying that their heresy was the last of all and a forerunner of Antichrist. And he taught the people that the Son of God was not a created being, neither had He come into being from non-existence, but that He was the Eternal Word and Wisdom of the Essence of the Father. And therefore it was impious to say, “there was a time when He was not,” for the Word was always co-existent with the Father. Wherefore have no fellowship with the most impious Arians. For there is no communion between light and darkness. For you are good Christians, but they, when they say that the

Son of the Father, the Word of God, is a created being, differ in naught from the heathen, since they worship that which is created, rather than God the creator. But believe that the Creation itself is angry with them because they number the Creator, the Lord of all, by whom all things came into being, with those things which were originated. All the people, therefore, rejoiced when they heard the anti-Christian heresy anathematized by such a man. And all the people in the city ran together to see Antony; and the Greeks and those who are called their Priests, came into the church, saying, "We ask to see the man of God," for so they all called him. For in that place also the Lord cleansed many of demons, and healed those who were mad. And many Greeks asked that they might even but touch the old man, believing that they should be profited. Assuredly as many became Christians in those few days as one would have seen made in a year. (*Life of Antony* 69–70)

Despite these defensive measures, the Council of Antioch of 339 reiterated the decision of the earlier Council of Tyre, deposed Athanasius, and placed Gregory of Cappadocia on the episcopal throne of Alexandria. Athanasius was sent away into a second exile, this time in Rome. By Athanasius's account, Gregory's seizure of the see was not peaceful.

Constantius at once writes letters, and commences a persecution against all, and sends Philagrius as Prefect with one Arsacius an eunuch; he sends also Gregory with a military force. And the same consequences followed as before. For gathering together a multitude of herdsmen and shepherds, and other dissolute youths belonging to the town, armed with swords and clubs, they attacked in a body the Church which is called the Church of Quirinus; and some they slew, some they trampled under foot, others they beat with stripes and cast into prison or banished. They haled away many women also, and dragged them openly into the court, and insulted them, dragging them by the hair. Some they proscribed; from some they took away their bread for no other reason, but that they might be induced to join the Arians, and receive Gregory, who had been sent by the Emperor. (*History* 2.10)<sup>29</sup>

Attacks on churches were, Athanasius thought, desecrations similar to Uzzah's desecration of the ark as it was being brought into Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:1–8; cf. *History* 7.57).

During his Roman exile, Athanasius began writing his great anti-Arian treatise, the *Discourses* (or *Orations*) *against the Arians*,<sup>30</sup> and established alliances with sympathetic Western church leaders, including Pope Julius and Marcellus of Ancyra, who had been deposed in 336 for teaching modalism and was in the West to appeal the decision to Julius. Julius attempted to restore Athanasius with a council in Rome in 341, but in the East the council was regarded as the act of an interloper. Yet progress was being made, and Constantius invited Athanasius to a face-to-face meeting shortly after Gregory's death in 345. Constantius permitted Athanasius to return to Egypt in 346, a

triumphant return that one scholar described as being “less the return of an exiled bishop than the *adventus* of a Roman emperor.”<sup>31</sup> He remained bishop of Alexandria for the next decade, the longest uninterrupted period of his entire forty-six-year episcopacy.

Despite the reconciliation with Athanasius, Constantius remained a supporter of the Arian cause. During the early 350s, he summoned two councils in the West that pressured Western bishops to adopt an explicitly anti-Nicene doctrinal standard. Having orchestrated the theological opposition, Constantius moved against Athanasius directly, ordering his agent in Alexandria, Syrianus, to seize the bishop. Just after midnight on February 8, 356, soldiers attacked the church at Theonas and moved against Athanasius. As Athanasius described the incident,

the Arians were mixed with the soldiers in order to exasperate them against me, and, as they were unacquainted with my person, to point me out to them. And although they are destitute of all feelings of compassion, yet when they hear the circumstances they will surely be quiet for very shame. It was now night, and some of the people were keeping a vigil preparatory to a communion on the morrow, when the General Syrianus suddenly came upon us with more than five thousand soldiers, having arms and drawn swords, bows, spears, and clubs, as I have related above. With these he surrounded the Church, stationing his soldiers near at hand, in order that no one might be able to leave the Church and pass by them. Now I considered that it would be unreasonable in me to desert the people during such a disturbance, and not to endanger myself in their behalf; therefore I sat down upon my throne, and desired the Deacon to read a Psalm, and the people to answer, “For His mercy endures for ever,” and then all to withdraw and depart home. But the General having now made a forcible entry, and the soldiers having surrounded the sanctuary for the purpose of apprehending us, the Clergy and those of the laity, who were still there, cried out, and demanded that we too should withdraw. But I refused, declaring that I would not do so, until they had retired one and all. Accordingly I stood up, and having bidden prayer, I then made my request of them, that all should depart before me, saying that it was better that my safety should be endangered, than that any of them should receive hurt. So when the greater part had gone forth, and the rest were following, the monks who were there with us and certain of the Clergy came up and dragged us away. And thus (Truth is my witness), while some of the soldiers stood about the sanctuary, and others were going round the Church, we passed through, under the Lord’s guidance, and with His protection withdrew without observation, greatly glorifying God that we had not betrayed the people, but had first sent them away, and then had been able to save ourselves, and to escape the hands of them which sought after us. (*Defense of His Flight* 24)

Athanasius again saw his experience through biblical lenses. Like Jesus passing through the crowds at Nazareth who wanted to kill him (Luke 4:30), Athanasius safely escaped the troops of the emperor. When Athanasius defended

himself to Constantius, he thought of himself as an imitator of Paul: “To your Piety I answer with a loud and clear voice, and stretching forth my hand, as I have learned from the Apostle, ‘I call God for a record upon my soul’” (2 Cor. 1:23; *Defense before Constantius* 3). Constantius was Saul slaughtering priests at Nob (*History* 8.67; 1 Sam. 21). Athanasius depicts Constantius as, in fact, a conglomeration of all the worst kings and rulers in Scripture:

Ahab himself did not act so cruelly towards the priests of God, as this man has acted towards the Bishops. For he was at least pricked in his conscience, when Naboth had been murdered, and was afraid at the sight (1 Kings 21:20) of Elijah, but this man neither revered the great Hosius, nor was wearied or pricked in conscience, after banishing so many Bishops; but like another Pharaoh, the more he is afflicted, the more he is hardened, and imagines greater wickedness day by day. And the most extraordinary instance of his iniquity was the following. It happened that when the Bishops were condemned to banishment, certain other persons also received their sentence on charges of murder or sedition or theft, each according to the quality of his offense. These men after a few months he released, on being requested to do so, as Pilate did Barabbas; but the servants of Christ he not only refused to set at liberty, but even sentenced them to more unmerciful punishment in the place of their exile, proving himself “an undying evil” to them. To the others through congeniality of disposition he became a friend; but to the orthodox he was an enemy on account of their true faith in Christ. Is it not clear to all men from hence, that the Jews of old when they demanded Barabbas, and crucified the Lord, acted but the part which these present enemies of Christ are acting together with Constantius? Nay, that he is even more bitter than Pilate. For Pilate, when he perceived (Matt. 27:24) the injustice of the deed, washed his hands; but this man, while he banishes the saints, gnashes his teeth against them more and more. (*History* 8.68)

Constantius is, in short, a Herod (*History* 7.52).

Athanasius’s biblical dramatizations of his life thus support a political theology. As we have seen, he regularly charges that the Arians are like the Jews who rejected the incarnate Son and sold themselves out to Caesar (that is, to Constantius; *History* 4.33; *Discourses* 1.7; 1.10). Like the Jews, the Arians will be punished for their unfaithfulness: “The Jews then have the penal award of their denial; for their city as well as their reasoning came to naught” (*Discourses* 2.42). Their fear of the emperor is the only thing that keeps them from letting their true theological colors show: “Let them openly confess themselves scholars of Caiaphas and Herod, instead of cloaking Judaism with the name of Christianity, and let them deny outright, as we have said before, the Savior’s appearance in the flesh, for this doctrine is akin to their heresy; or if they fear openly to Judaize and be circumcised, from servility towards Constantius and for their sake whom they have beguiled, then let them not say what the Jews say; for if they disown the name, let them in fairness renounce the doctrine” (*Discourses* 3.28). With the Pharisees, the Arians cry out, “No

king but Caesar” (*History* 4.33). The orthodox, by contrast, know a King greater than any creature, the incarnate Word of the Father, exalted now to a heavenly throne. As a result, they have the courage to despise earthly kings.

Athanasius often combines political and apocalyptic themes. Constantius’s expulsion of bishops is “an insurrection of impiety against godliness,” and thus his zeal for Arianism is “a prelude to the coming of Antichrist, for whom Constantius is thus preparing the way” (*History* 6.46). Constantius exhibits every mark of Antichrist himself: “And does not the vision of Daniel (7:25) thus describe Antichrist; that he shall make war with the saints, and prevail against them, and exceed all that have been before him in evil deeds and shall humble three kings, and speak words against the Most High, and shall think to change times and laws? Now what other person besides Constantius has ever attempted to do these things? He is surely such a one as Antichrist would be” (*History* 8.74).

After escaping the troops sent to arrest him, Athanasius fled to the desert and spent the next six years among the Egyptian monks. Some charged him with cowardice for abandoning Alexandria, as Athanasius had himself mocked Arian leaders who fled from a Roman synod as men who were guilty “like Cain” (*Letter to the Church of Alexandria*), but Athanasius defended himself with biblical precedents:

He who censures me in this matter must presume also to blame the great Apostle Peter, because though he was shut up and guarded by soldiers, he followed the angel that summoned him, and when he had gone forth from the prison and escaped in safety, he did not return and surrender himself, although he heard what Herod had done. Let the Arian in his madness censure the Apostle Paul, because when he was let down from the wall and had escaped in safety, he did not change his mind, and return and give himself up; or Moses, because he returned not out of Midian into Egypt, that he might be taken of them that sought after him; or David, because when he was concealed in the cave, he did not discover himself to Saul. As also the sons of the prophets remained in their caves, and did not surrender themselves to Ahab. This would have been to act contrary to the commandment, since he says, “You shall not tempt the Lord your God.” (*Defense of His Flight*, 25)

Constantius placed George over the church of Alexandria, and, like his predecessor Gregory, he violently persecuted the orthodox faithful of Alexandria. When George was lynched by an angry mob in 361, Athanasius returned to the city, holding the episcopacy for a brief period between February and October 362, before the pagan emperor Julian forced him again to flee into the desert. Julian died shortly afterward, and Athanasius returned a year later, this time with the support of the emperor, Jovian. When Jovian died in February 364, Athanasius found himself again opposed by an anti-Nicene Eastern emperor, Valens, who arrested and exiled Athanasius for the fifth and

last time. He was back in Alexandria before 364 was over, and he remained bishop until his death on May 2, 373.

Through most of the history of the church, Athanasius has been regarded as both a theologian of superior ability and a theological warrior of the first order. He is a Christian hero, standing with his Lord *contra mundum*. Even Edward Gibbon, who found little to admire among early Christians, commended Athanasius for his “superiority of character and abilities,” though the bishop of Alexandria was, like all early Christians, “tainted with the contagion of fanaticism.”<sup>32</sup> Harnack too believed that he was not “ignoble or mean” by the standards of the time, and, despite his flaws, he “saved the character of Christianity as a religion of the living fellowship with God.” In Harnack’s view, Athanasius eschewed the philosophical speculation that had corrupted the church, and he returned to the simplicity of Scripture.<sup>33</sup>

Recent historians have been less impressed. Timothy Barnes compares Athanasius to a modern gangster and a mafioso, though he also recognizes the bishop’s stature, albeit one that depended on an absence of Christian virtues.<sup>34</sup> R. P. C. Hanson finds him a deeply ambiguous figure. There is no doubt that Athanasius was a tough customer, and he employed methods to combat heresy and to shore up the Nicene settlement that would make modern bishops blanch. His self-defenses are often evasive. A recently discovered papyrus contains a letter from the Melitian Callistus, written around 335, which complains about “adherents of Athanasius” who terrorized the Melitians.<sup>35</sup> It belies Athanasius’s frequent claim that the Arians were the ones who, like the devil, broke “down the doors of those who do not receive him” (*History* 33). Athanasius was not the kind of man you would want as an enemy.

Without excusing his errors and sins, we should recognize that only a tough man, a man of extraordinary determination, could have so single-mindedly fought off Arian views that he regarded as dangerous blasphemies threatening the foundations of the gospel and the church. Only a very determined man could have stood against emperors and councils of bishops, endured five exiles, and fought off numerous false accusations, all in defense of the gospel. It is testimony to the sincerity of the appeals to love and gentleness (especially evident in his *Festal Letters*) that by the time he died, he was reconciled to nearly all his remaining opponents.

### “Arian” Diversity, Arian Unity

What was at stake in the Arian controversy? To answer that question, contemporary scholarship has shown that we need to be precise about what “Arianism” is and even ask whether it ever existed at all.

Many recent scholars have concluded that “Arianism” is a misnomer, a rhetorical construction that was mainly produced by Athanasius.<sup>36</sup> They offer

several reasons for this skepticism. Arius certainly had allies, both in Alexandria and elsewhere, but Arius himself played a comparatively minor role in the controversy, and his own views were not representative of all those on whom Athanasius attempted to pin the label.<sup>37</sup> Especially after Nicaea, attempts to mediate the dispute between “Arian” and “Nicene” produced a variety of positions. While there are continuities among the various parties, it is misleading to characterize this as a simple two-way debate.

Athanasius knew very well that the “Ario-maniacs” differed among themselves, and he made this an important apologetic point: while the orthodox stand together around the Nicene formula, the Arians fragment into mutually contradictory sects. Some, like Asterius (regularly labeled the “Sophist” in Athanasius’s writings), taught that there is an eternal “Wisdom” and “Word” that is “proper” to the Father’s essence. This was not the same as the Nicene position, since, for Asterius, the Father’s own proper Wisdom and Word are distinguished from the Son, and it is *through* this Wisdom and Word that the Son is begotten. Yet, in Athanasius’s view, Asterius was teaching a double “Ungenerate,” in contrast to Arius’s own insistence on the singularity of God’s ungeneratedness.

Another subtle difference is evident in “Arian” views of the Son’s knowledge of the Father and the Son’s immutability. In the *Thalia*, Arius emphasizes the absolute invisibility and incomprehensibility of the Father. According to Athanasius’s summary, Arius teaches that “‘even to the Son the Father is invisible,’ and ‘the Word cannot perfectly and exactly either see or know His own Father,’ but even what He knows and what He sees, He knows and sees ‘in proportion to His own measure,’ as we also know according to our own power. For the Son, too, he says, not only knows not the Father exactly, for He fails in comprehension, but ‘He knows not even His own essence’” (*Discourses* 1.6). Later anti-Nicene leaders, such as Aetius and Eunomius, disagreed. Aetius’s opposition to the Nicene formula, in fact, depends on the assumption that the Son knows his own essence. In Rowan Williams’s summary, “God knows he is by nature ingenerate, the Son knows he is by nature generated, therefore they cannot be consubstantial. The repudiation of the homoousion here actually depends upon the Son knowing whence and what he is.”<sup>38</sup> The theology of the *Thalia* was later unpopular among the anti-Nicene bishops, and Williams suggests that Athanasius quotes from it not because it was influential, but in order to embarrass those who had defended Arius.

Differences among anti-Nicene theologians regarding the changeability of the Son are more subtle, probably due more to gradations in theological sophistication than to worked-out disagreements. Arius is clear that the Son is not elevated to his status, but from the beginning possesses all that a creature can possess. Because the Son is a creature, he is “theoretically” changeable and unstable, but Arius insists that the Son remains himself unchangeable due to the gracious will of God his Father. He is not unchangeable *in essence*,

though *in fact* the Son never changes. Responding to Arius, however, Alexander returns again and again to the problem of mutability, and this suggests that some of Arius's supporters were "less than completely clear on the admittedly fine distinctions being drawn between essential and *de facto* immutability."<sup>39</sup>

Athanasius was a bishop until his death in 373, that is, for nearly a half century after the Nicene council, and he was fixated on defending the Nicene formula, especially the controversial term *homoousios*, "one substance."<sup>40</sup> Yet, through the middle decades of the fourth century, anti-Nicene theology was fracturing and anti-Nicene parties were proliferating.

During the 350s, the "Anomians" Aetius and Eunomius began to spread the view that the Son was "unlike" (*anomoios*) the Father, apparently in an attempt to address the ambiguity of the earlier compromise "homoian" position, the view that the Son was (in some undefined way) "like" (*homoios*) the Father. Dissatisfied with the hedging and qualifications of the homoian position, the Anomians openly declared that the Son had a different *ousia* (essence) from the Father and that the Spirit was a third essence again. Basil of Ancyra attempted a compromise formula, stressing that the likeness of Father and Son had to be a likeness of essence, and offered *homoiousios* as a formula.<sup>41</sup> When a compromise of homoians and homoiousians was reached, Athanasius, exiled in the Egyptian desert, wrote a series of treatises defending the original Nicene position, defending himself to Constantius and extending the terminology of *homoousios* to the Holy Spirit. Yet, at the same time, he continued to describe his now very diverse opponents as "Arians" or "Eusebians."

Given these complications, does it make any sense to speak of "Arianism" at all? I believe it still does. In this book, the diversity of anti-Nicene theologies will not play a major role. My object is to examine Athanasius's views of Scripture and metaphysics, and my aim is more to distill Athanasius's positive theology from the polemics than to examine the rhetoric or accuracy of those polemics. For this reason, I will generally use "Arian" in the way that Athanasius uses the term, to describe a collection of views that are not necessarily derived from Arius himself nor held by all who are labeled "Arians." For the sake of simplicity, I will in subsequent sections drop the scare quotes that Rowan Williams thought should surround the term. This procedure is legitimate, not only because it reflects Athanasius's own usage, but also because, despite the diversity, there were common themes among the various anti-Nicene parties. They were, at the very least, all anti-Nicene, and thus it makes sense to ask what the overall agenda of "Arianism" or "anti-Nicene theology" was.<sup>42</sup>

## Motivations of Arian Theology

What was Arius after? What drove the Arians to take the positions that they did? In recent research, Arius has had his defenders, and even the critics have

attempted to assess his teaching sympathetically. Maurice Wiles has noted that in Arius's own summaries of his teaching he draws on biblical terminology at least as often as he does on philosophical terminology. Though he is using extrabiblical terminology when he says that God is "ingenerate," he also quotes directly from Paul's letters, which describe God as "alone immortal, alone eternal, only wise" (Rom. 16:27; 1 Tim. 1:17).<sup>43</sup>

Rowan Williams has characterized the divergent theologies of the fourth century as a contest between "Academic" and "Catholic" theologies. Arius continued the Alexandrian tradition of speculative theology, while Alexander and Athanasius were pastoral and Catholic theologians. Prior to Constantine's conversion, when the church did not have to bear a burden of social and political authority, academic theologians like Arius could get on "tolerably well." After Constantine, not so well.<sup>44</sup>

Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh argue that Arius is soteriologically motivated. Arius and early Arians offer a Christ who is warmer, freer, more human in his changeability and struggles than the orthodox Christ. The orthodox Christ keeps his distance, wrapped in the mantle of his flesh, safely resisting temptation with his irresistible divine power. The Arian Jesus is more like us, and his risky story of suffering and ascent provides a model for us to emulate and so be saved.<sup>45</sup>

According to R. P. C. Hanson, the debate was about the cross of Jesus. The Arians confessed a suffering savior and knew that a human sufferer was not sufficient. To be a saving death, Jesus's death on the cross must be the death of God; to deliver humanity, we need a God who suffers. Since they shared with Athanasius the view that God is in himself impassible, however, they made allowance for the suffering of Jesus by arguing that he is not equal to the Father. Jesus is God dying on a cross, just not the supreme Ungenerate God.<sup>46</sup>

Others have supported Hanson's account. Drawing on Asterius's *Homilies on the Psalms*, Maurice Wiles and Robert Gregg have made the intriguing argument that, far from being motivated by cosmological or philosophical concerns, some within the Arian camp sidestepped such questions. In his homilies, Asterius ignores the issues that became the preoccupations of the debate. "No stress is laid," Wiles and Gregg conclude, "on the transcendence of the Father, and nothing is said about the created status of the Son." Instead, Asterius's concern is wholly with the cross. Salvation demanded that God go to the cross; only God could overcome death by death and overcome demons through the cross. How exactly the God on the cross related to the eternal God is left unexplained. The Father-Son relation becomes central not because it was central to the preaching of the Arian party; rather, these issues become crucial "because the relation of the Son to the Father was the thing about which the Arians were least inclined to speak."<sup>47</sup> The Arian controversy arose because those sympathetic to Arius left themselves vulnerable on one flank.

Prior to the revisionist scholarship of the past several decades, it was commonly said that Arius's theology was driven by prior commitments to some form of Hellenistic theology or metaphysics. Arius believed that an absolute God had to be wholly other, wholly transcendent, wholly beyond the "limit" of a necessary relation to something outside himself. The high God, further, is far too exalted to have much to do with the mess and muck and mayhem of the creation, and so he must act through a created mediator in creating and redeeming the world, a mediator who cannot be equal to the high God. Arius, it was said, was among the "hellenizers" of Christian faith.

Hellenization, like Arianism, must today learn to live within scare quotes, but it has played a large role in efforts to understand the early history of Christianity. In his monumental *History of Dogma*, Adolf von Harnack traced the infiltration of Hellenism into Christianity during the first three centuries AD. Among the early apologists, one finds a "positive" form of hellenization, the identification of the Greek *Logos* with Jesus Christ. According to Harnack, the "most important step that was ever taken in the domain of Christian doctrine" occurred when "the Christian apologists of the second century drew the equation." The epoch-making character of this equation was not so much in the specific claim being made but in the larger stance that the church adopted by this equation. By equating the Greek *Logos* with Jesus, the church came to view itself as a philosophical school; *Logos* speculation is the spirit of Greek philosophy transferred into the church. The danger is that the church becomes attached to a message that does not depend on the gospel. Harnack writes,

The message of religion appears here clothed in a knowledge of the world and of the ground of the world which had already been obtained without any reference to it, and therefore religion itself has here become a doctrine which has, indeed, its certainty in the Gospel, but only in part derives its contents from it, and which can only be appropriated by such as are neither poor in spirit nor weary and heavy laden. . . . The characteristic of this dogma is that it represents itself in no sense as foolishness, but as wisdom, and at the same time desires to be regarded as the contents of revelation itself. Dogma in its conception and development is a work of the Greek spirit on the soil of the Gospel.<sup>48</sup>

Dogmatic, or hellenized, Christianity had its benefits, Harnack recognizes, since it enabled the church to defeat paganism in the short run. In the long run, though, the triumph of hellenization in the Catholic Church was simply the half-victory of "acute Hellenism," that is, gnosticism. "Historical inquiry," he remarks, "sees in Gnosticism a series of undertakings, which in a certain way is analogous to the Catholic embodiment of Christianity, in doctrine, morals, and worship. The great distinction here consists essentially in the fact that the gnostic systems represent the acute secularizing or hellenizing of Christianity, with the rejection of the Old Testament; while the Catholic

system, on the other hand, represents a gradual process of the same kind with the conservation of the Old Testament.”<sup>49</sup>

Even while struggling with gnosticism, the church was being co-opted by it, since the battle “compelled the church to put its teaching, its worship, and its discipline into fixed forms and ordinances, and to exclude everyone who would not yield them obedience.” Defining “Catholic” as “the church of doctrine and of law,” Harnack concludes that “the Catholic church had its origin in the struggle with Gnosticism.” Though it “kept Dualism and the acute phase of Hellenism at bay,” it became “a community with a fully worked out scheme of doctrine, and a definite form of public worship,” and these liturgical forms were “analogous to those which it combated in the Gnostics.”<sup>50</sup> Binding dogma, intellectualism, institutionalization, and the decline of evangelistic zeal resulted.

Harnack excepts Athanasius from this trend, viewing him as a great exemplar of an earlier, simpler, more biblical Christianity. More recently, some theologians have claimed that Athanasius’s theology, as well as the Nicene theology that he defended and elaborated, is also a hellenized faith. Catherine Mowry LaCugna argues that after the Council of Nicaea in 325, the focus of Christian theology changed decisively from the *oikonomia* of redemption to the *theologia* of God’s inner life. According to LaCugna, the pressing issue of the fourth-century debate concerned the suffering of God. One option, taken by Arius and those who later were labeled “Arians,” was to acknowledge that God suffers but to argue that the God who suffers is not the high God who begets the Son; rather, the God who suffers is the Son, a secondary and subordinate being.

Athanasius pursued the other, “orthodox” option, which, in LaCugna’s view, involved the claim that the “sufferings of Christ were feigned, or belonged to the flesh but not to the soul.” All “signs of weakness or limitation were also denied to the Logos,” as “Athanasius went to great exegetical lengths to explain how the biblical texts that show human defects do not mean what they say they mean.” In the process, she argues, the meaning of *oikonomia* changes from “the plan of salvation hidden in God from the beginning but made manifest in Christ” to the “more narrow meaning of ‘the work of salvation by Christ *qua homo*.’”<sup>51</sup> LaCugna hedges on whether to call these shifts “hellenization,” but she argues that the Nicene use of the term *homoousios*, and the strict opposition to subordination of the Son to the Father, unmoored *theologia* from its connection to *oikonomia*, with fateful results for the later history of theology.

Harnack’s hellenization thesis has been subjected to searching criticism, and an alternative account of the interaction of Christianity with Greco-Roman civilization has been offered. Writing not as a historian of dogma but as one of Harnack’s dreaded “dogmaticians,” Robert Jenson describes the relation of the gospel to philosophy during the first four centuries as an “evangelization of

metaphysics.” Far from being conformed to Hellenistic categories and forms, the church in the persons of her theologians employed Greek concepts and terms to express something that Greek philosophy could never have envisioned. For Jenson, the central issue concerns time. Greek metaphysics and religion, he argues, were an elaborate effort to escape the corrosive effects of time.

It was the great single dogma of late Mediterranean antiquity’s religion and irreligion, that no story can be “really” true of God, that deity equals “impasibility.” It is not merely that the gospel tells a story about the object of worship; every religion of antiquity did that. The gospel identifies God as “He who brought Israel from Egypt and our Lord Jesus from the dead.” Therefore the gospel cannot rescind from its story at any depth whatsoever of experience, mystical penetration or *theologia*. Developed trinitarian liturgy and theology appeared as the church maintained the gospel’s identification of God in the very teeth of what everybody knew to be of course and obviously true of God, and in every nook of practice or theory where uncircumcised theological self-evidency lurked.<sup>52</sup>

To Jenson, Arianism is of a piece with this standard Greek metaphysics. According to the Arian perspective, there must be something or someone that escapes time and change. Otherwise, we are all unmoored, adrift in a shifting sea of time-bound being. God is the anchor because he is outside time. Since God is that timelessness, temporal reality has to be transcended in order to get to God. From a premise of the incompatibility of God and time, one arrives at a wholly apophatic theology.

Soteriological concerns were also central to Arianism, and here again Jenson finds worries lurking about God and time. Salvation involves an ascension out of temporality, so if we are to be saved, there must be something that utterly transcends time. Any being involved with time, such as Jesus the Son manifestly is, cannot be the ultimate Savior. Unless he transcends time, he cannot enable us to transcend time. Against all the pressures of Greek philosophy, the church in the fourth century began to fulfill what Jenson describes as the calling of trinitarian theology, namely, “to maintain against all compunctions that the biblical story about God and us is true of and for God Himself.”<sup>53</sup>

From the perspective of the chief participant, Athanasius, Jenson’s account draws the battle lines more clearly than Harnack’s. On the one hand, as noted above, Athanasius regularly charges that the Arians are “Jews.” There is certainly an element of Jew-baiting in the label, and in this Athanasius adopts the standard Christian rhetoric of his day. Athanasius’s vitriol is mild by comparison with comments from Constantine and other early fourth-century Christians, but it is still indefensible.<sup>54</sup> The rhetorical excess should not, however, blind us to the fundamental and wholly legitimate theological issue that Athanasius raises. He recognizes a common thread between the Jewish affirmation of a “strict” (i.e., nontrinitarian) monotheism and the

Arian denial that the Son is eternal God. In a discussion of the christological hymn of Philippians 2, Athanasius insists that the Son both humbled himself and was exalted. He challenges the Arians to explain what the Son was before the incarnation. If he was not Son before, what was he? Did he exist at all? Is Jesus simply a man? If the Arians draw that conclusion, they are no better than the first-century Jews who failed to recognize the deity of Jesus (*Discourses* 1.38). Arians look “at what is done divinely by the Word” and then “deny the body, or looking at what is proper to the body, deny the Word’s presence in the flesh, or from what is human entertain low thoughts concerning the Word.” Arius, “as a Jewish vintner, mixing water with the wine, shall account the Cross an offense, or as a Gentile, will deem the preaching folly” (*Discourses* 3.35).

On the other hand, Athanasius also makes clear that he regards the Arians, and not the orthodox, as the ones who have sold out to Hellenism. Especially in his apologetic *Against the Pagans*, Athanasius makes it clear that he recognizes a fundamental antithesis between Greek and Christian religion. Similarly, in the *Discourses*, he contrasts the local and changeable gods of Greece to the eternal and faithful God of Scripture: “Now the so-called gods of the Greeks, unworthy the name, are faithful neither in their essence nor in their promises; for the same are not everywhere, nay, the local deities come to naught in course of time, and undergo a natural dissolution” (*Discourses* 2.10). All heretics, not just the Arians, are in the same genealogy. All are like the gentiles, who are atheists because they do not know the true God.

There are many other heresies too, which use the words only, but not in a right sense, as I have said, nor with sound faith, and in consequence the water which they administer is unprofitable, as deficient in piety, so that he who is sprinkled by them is rather polluted by irreligion than redeemed. So Gentiles also, though the name of God is on their lips, incur the charge of Atheism, because they know not the real and very God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. So Manichees and Phrygians, and the disciples of the Samosatene, though using the Names, nevertheless are heretics, and the Arians follow in the same course, though they read the words of Scripture, and use the Names, yet they too mock those who receive the rite from them, being more irreligious than the other heresies, and advancing beyond them, and making them seem innocent by their own recklessness of speech. For these other heresies lie against the truth in some certain respect, either erring concerning the Lord’s Body, as if He did not take flesh of Mary, or as if He has not died at all, nor become man, but only appeared, and was not truly, and seemed to have a body when He had not, and seemed to have the shape of man, as visions in a dream; but the Arians are without disguise irreligious against the Father Himself. For hearing from the Scriptures that His Godhead is represented in the Son as in an image, they blaspheme, saying, that it is a creature, and everywhere concerning that Image, they carry about with them the phrase, “He was not,” as mud in a wallet, and spit it forth as serpents their venom. (*Discourses* 2.43)

To Athanasius, the substance of Arianism is Hellenistic. They are Greek in claiming that the wisdom to create can be learned and passed on from one being to another (*Discourses* 2.28). Like the Greeks, the Arians believe in an original monad that comes to a triad by a process of addition.

It belongs to Greeks, to introduce an originated Triad, and to level It with things originate; for these do admit of deficiencies and additions; but the faith of Christians acknowledges the blessed Triad as unalterable and perfect and ever what It was, neither adding to It what is more, nor imputing to It any loss (for both ideas are irreligious), and therefore it dissociates It from all things generated, and it guards as indivisible and worships the unity of the Godhead Itself; and shuns the Arian blasphemies, and confesses and acknowledges that the Son was ever; for He is eternal, as is the Father, of whom He is the Eternal Word,— to which subject let us now return again. (*Discourses* 1.18)

Like all Hellenists, the Arians are ultimately idolaters, worshipping the creature rather than the Creator. Arius and Eusebius, Athanasius argues, attempt to use human categories to explain God and thus come under Paul's charge against pagans who "change God's glory into an image made like to corruptible man" (*Discourses* 1.22). Arians say that the Son is originate, but this amounts to the equalizing of the originate and Unoriginate, which means an equalizing of the creature and the Creator. Arians want to measure God by the same standard they apply to creatures (*ex isou*): "If they will have it that the one is like the other, so that he who sees the one beholds the other, they are like to say that the Unoriginate is the image of creatures; the end of which is a confusion of the whole subject, an equaling of things originated with the Unoriginate, and a denial of the Unoriginate by measuring Him with the works; and all to reduce the Son into their number" (*Discourses* 1.31).

Arians are even worse than Greeks. Greeks worship a single Unoriginate being and many originate beings, but the Arians attribute diverse natures to God himself:

For their subtle saying which they are accustomed to urge, "We say not two Unoriginates," they plainly say to deceive the simple; for in their very professing "We say not two Unoriginates," they imply two Gods, and these with different natures, one originate and one Unoriginate. And though the Greeks worship one Unoriginate and many originate, but these one Unoriginate and one originate, this is no difference from them; for the God whom they call originate is one out of many, and again the many gods of the Greeks have the same nature with this one, for both he and they are creatures. (*Discourses* 3.16)

He follows up by linking the Hellenistic Arians once again with the Jews: "They have fallen from the truth, and are greater traitors than the Jews in

denying the Christ, and they wallow with the Gentiles, hateful as they are to God, worshipping the creature and many deities” (*Discourses* 3.16).

At several points, Athanasius argues that Arianism reduces to pantheism or polytheism. If the Son participates in the Unoriginate, just like everything else, and yet the Son is called “God,” then what difference is there between the nature of the Son and the nature of all other originated things? “The Ario-maniacs with reason incur the charge of polytheism or else of atheism,” he writes, “because they idly talk of the Son as external and a creature, and again the Spirit as from nothing. For either they will say that the Word is not God; or saying that He is God, because it is so written, but not proper to the Father’s Essence, they will introduce many because of their difference of kind (unless forsooth they shall dare to say that by participation only, He, as all things else, is called God; though, if this be their sentiment, their irreligion is the same, since they consider the Word as one among all things” (*Discourses* 3.15). If the Son is a creature we call God, can we call *all* creatures God? For Athanasius, the Arian theology of “total otherness” collapses into a pantheistic monism.

Elsewhere, Athanasius worries that the Arians will end up claiming that the creation account of Genesis 1 is describing the formation of the Son, thus drawing God himself into the “all” of the creation. He hedges the argument and formulates it as a “fear” for the direction of Arianism, but the import is clear. “From hearing, ‘In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth,’ and ‘He made the sun and the moon,’ and ‘He made the sea,’” Athanasius argues, the Arians “should come in time to call the Word the heaven, and the Light which took place on the first day, and the earth, and each particular thing that has been made, so as to end in resembling the Stoics, as they are called, the one drawing out their God into all things, the other ranking God’s Word with each work in particular; which they have well near done already, saying that He is one of His works” (*Discourses* 2.11).

Similarly, Arianism collapses back into Greek polytheism. If the Son is not eternal God, he is either a creature or a second God. If the latter, then the Arians are starting down a slippery slope, because if there is a second God, why not a third, fourth, tenth, millionth?

If it be not so, but the Word is a creature and a work out of nothing, either He is not True God because He is Himself one of the creatures, or if they name Him God from regard for the Scriptures, they must of necessity say that there are two Gods, one Creator, the other creature, and must serve two Lords, one Unoriginate, and the other originate and a creature; and must have two faiths, one in the True God, and the other in one who is made and fashioned by themselves and called God. And it follows of necessity in so great blindness, that, when they worship the Unoriginate, they renounce the originate, and when they come to the creature, they turn from the Creator. For they cannot see the One in the Other, because their natures and operations are foreign and distinct. And

with such sentiments, they will certainly be going on to more gods, for this will be the essay of those who revolt from the One God. (*Discourses* 3.16)

## Conclusion

What would Athanasius say about “Scripture and metaphysics”? He would charge that the Arians have been co-opted by an alien metaphysical scheme and that their Hellenism has led them into idolatry and polytheism. Despite their professed adherence to Scripture, their real convictions come from elsewhere. For himself, Athanasius would claim that all his “metaphysical” convictions arise from the gospel, from meditation on Scripture. Though we have not quite begun to examine the intersection of Scripture and metaphysics in Athanasius’s theology, we have begun to see how he might make good on that claim. Athanasius reads his life, and the history that surrounds him, through biblical lenses. What justifies that procedure? Is this anything more than hubris, a bishop thinking of himself more highly than he ought? I suspect that his answer would be that he was doing just what Paul does in 2 Corinthians, that is, describing his own ministry as a ministry conformed to the pattern of Christ’s sufferings. Scripture illuminates Athanasius’s life because Scripture is about Christ, and Christ has impressed his image on Athanasius so that Athanasius’s life is remade in the image of his suffering, the image of his cross.