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Arius: A Classical Alexandrian Theologian

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HNR 499

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Christianity, as a part of the Judaic tradition, needed a way to remain monotheistic while maintaining that both Jesus and God were divine beings, because from its beginning Christianity has sought to identify who Jesus' relation to God really was. Christianity was based on the belief in one God but at the same time they expressed the belief that Jesus was also divine and they had to come to terms with how this could be. To try and fill this void many different options emerged, the most extreme being Monrchanism, the belief that there was only one god with three personas, and Arianism, the belief that there was only one god, while Jesus and the Holy Spirit were creatures. The Church was forced to decide if Jesus was God, was he other than God, or did Jesus' nature lie somewhere in between the two extremes.

In the fourth century Jerome wrote, "The whole world groaned and marveled to find itself Arian."¹ At the beginning of the fourth century the Arian movement burst into life, igniting a controversy that shaped the entire Christian theology. Controversy over the Arian beliefs quickly spread throughout the Roman Empire. The controversy grew so great that Constantine, the Roman Emperor, was forced to call a council to settle the issue. The Council of Nicea in 325, also called the first Ecumenical Council, settled the debate by creating an orthodox, not Arian, creed that the church demanded its members follow. The Nicene Creed rejected both Arianism and Gnosticism. Arianism developed from the traditions common in the east. Arius (c. 250-336) claimed that he was not teaching new ideas; instead he claimed that his ideas about Christ had a long history which he had learned from his teachers.²

¹J.N.D. Kelley, *Early Christian Doctrines* (Oxford: Harper One, 1978), 238.

²J.N.D. Kelley, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 230.

While the East and the West were still united as a common church, each began to develop in different ways. When the Eastern Church erred it was on the side of subordinationism and emphasized the division of God and Jesus, to protect God's purity. Whereas when the Western Church erred it was on the side of Monarchianism, which emphasized the unity of God.³ Arius carried on the traditions of many Eastern members of the church but many of the ideas he expressed were heresies that had been addressed in the past. Arianism was rejected at the Council of Nicaea in 325, regardless of how popular the movement was, because the church fathers followed the traditional view of their religion and many of the views Arius expressed had already been declared heretical.

Arius claimed that he drew on a long line of church history when he created his beliefs. Arius did not see himself as non orthodox, instead he saw himself as continuing the Alexandrian intellectual tradition, which not only represented a doctrinal tradition, but drew on an Alexandrian scholastic way of authenticating theology, not through ecclesial hierarchy but through the intellectual legacy of men like Clement and Origen.⁴ Arius was a conservative theologian, too rooted in past tradition to allow for a change in his fundamental view of the Godhead. Arius saw Alexander as an innovator who was breaking away from accepted tradition.⁵ By examining many of the church theologians it is clear that many of Arius' beliefs could have been passed down to him and can be portrayed as a natural out flowing of authentic Christianity.⁶

Arius' ideas can be traced as far back as the apologists. The apologists were a group of early Christian theologians who took it upon themselves to defend Christianity against the charges of atheism, which had been leveled against Christians. Justin (c. 100-165) and the

³ William G. Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 16.

⁴ Andrew McGowan, "The Shadow of Arius: Subordinationism Then and Now," *St. Mark's Review* (2005), 26.

⁵ Antonio Orbe, "Alexander and Arius of Alexandria: the last ante-Nicene theologians" in *Arius and Athanasius*, ed. by Charles Kannengiesser (Hampshire: Variorum, 1991), 392.

⁶ Victor Kuligin, "The Politics of Heresy," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* (2005), 289.

apologists were guilty of subordination. Justin described the *Logos* as a second God worshipped in a secondary rank. The apologists much like Arius were attempting to protect the monotheism of God. The apologists also believed that the *Logos* as manifested must necessarily be limited.⁷ Many of the early logos theologies found the existence and the subordination of the logos to be essential to one another, because of the utter transcendence of God. They believed that the logos needed to be a mediating being, bridging the gap between the inferable God and the world in flux.⁸ The apologists did not believe that Christ was a creature but it is easy to see how the idea of protecting God's monotheism could be carried one step further.

In the closing decades of the second century a new form of Christianity came into existence, called Dynamic Monarchianism, also called adoptionism.⁹ Adoptionists believed that Christ was a mere man upon whom God's spirit had descended, from God but the man was not divine in his own right. The Adoptionists believed that Jesus was infused with God's spirit at the time of his baptism. Many Adoptionists believed that the Orthodox view was committed to ditheism, the belief in multiple gods. Obviously Christians could not accept a theology that put forth two gods, so it was clear why the adoptionists came up with their own theology. Novatian clearly stated the adoptionists' views when he wrote, "If the Father is one and the Son another, and if the Father is God and Christ God, then there is not one God but two Gods are simultaneously brought forward, the Father and the Son."¹⁰

Paul of Samosata (c. 200-275) had a slightly different view than most Adoptionists. Paul did not believe that the self subsistent word dwelt within Christ. Instead, Paul applied the title Word to God's commands and ordinances. Paul believed that God ordered what he wanted

⁷ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 101.

⁸ Andrew McGowan, "The Shadow of Arius," 26.

⁹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 117.

¹⁰ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 117.

through the man Jesus. In Paul's view the word was simply an utterance of God and not a subsistent person, as the orthodox view was coming to believe.¹¹

Paul of Samosata is given credit for being the teacher of Lucian, who founded a catechetical school at Antioch. Arius in a letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia called upon Eusebius as a fellow Lucianist. The fact that Eusebius, a proven student of Lucian, supported Arius, lends credence to the belief that Arius studied under Lucian. Antioch had a very literalist exegesis and exaggerated Monarchiansim. It is possible that Arius received at least some of his ideas from Lucian and Paul, who adhered to the Antiochene theology.¹² It is also possible that Arius learned directly from Paul; however Arius would have needed to be born around the 250s, which is the commonly accepted date of his birth, to have had any direct contact with Paul.¹³ Arius differs from Paul on the issue of whether the Word is a person. However, Arius could have developed this difference due to the strong influence of Origen in Alexandria. Arius claimed to be continuing the traditions of the bishops Dionysius and Alexander, which could account for the influence of Origen in his theology.¹⁴

Origen (c. 185-254) was born around 185 and died around 254. Origen was an influential theologian who taught in Alexandria. Origen believed that Jesus was coeternal with the Father and that the father begets the Son by an eternal act and it cannot be said that, "There was when he was not."¹⁵ Origen believed that the Son's divinity was derivative of the Father's, which made the Son a secondary God.¹⁶ The Word, Origen believes, is one with God but he stands on a lower level in the Hierarchy.¹⁷ When discussing the Holy Spirit Origen speaks of it as being the most

¹¹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 117-118.

¹² J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 230.

¹³ Rowan Williams, *Arius Before Arianism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987), 30-31.

¹⁴ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 230.

¹⁵ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 128.

¹⁶ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 128

¹⁷ William Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, 14.

honorable of beings brought into existence by the Father through Christ. Origen's language seems to imply that he believed the Holy Spirit was a creature, the first among creatures but still a creature. Origen also believed that each part of the Godhead had its own hypostasis, a view that was accepted at Nicaea. Origen believed that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all had individual substances which meant individual existence. Origen believed that Father and Son were different in substance but that they were one in will. Origen believed that the Son is an image of the Father's glory and as Son he participates in the Father's Godhead. In a very platonic sense, Origen states, that the Son deserves a second degree of honor because he is not absolute goodness and truth instead his goodness and truth are reflections of the Father.¹⁸ Origen's theology was so vast and variegated that many of Origen's successors fell into the trap of only emphasizing a single part of Origen's theology.¹⁹ Arius discarded certain elements of Origen's ideas, namely the idea of eternal generation, but in others ways Arius drew heavily on the ideas of Origen and he took Origen's subordination to the extreme.

Origen claimed that he carried on the same tradition that Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, had espoused. Dionysius of Alexandria (r. 248-265), another figure in the adoptionist tradition, is one of the best known proponents of Origen's theology. Dionysius held to the belief that there needed to be three hypostases unless the trinity was to be dissolved. Dionysius was concerned that people understand that while there were three hypostases he was not separating the trinity. Dionysius believed the son was eternal and claimed that the trinity could not be separated, which was made clear simply by their titles. A father could not be

¹⁸ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 128-132.

¹⁹ William Rush, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, 15.

without a son, or a son without a father. Also, a spirit implies the source and the medium from which it proceeds forth.²⁰

Arius lived in a time where many diverse thoughts were circulating about the nature of God and the Son; it is no wonder that Arius devised a theology separate from the orthodox position. Alexandria with its many different theologians was a prime location for a new Christian theology to take place.

In order to understand how the Trinitarian controversy arose it is important to understand the background of Arius and the social and political context of third and fourth century Alexandria. To begin with, Arius was born in Libya around the year 250, and it is likely that Arius trained under Lucian (c. 240-312). Arius claims his lineage through Lucian in a letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia in 318.²¹ Arius also worked at the didaskaleion, the Christian school for catechisms and doctrine. The didaskaleion was founded by Origen and was made prestigious by a series of scholars following Origen. The didaskaleion was a school of catechism, which carried on the ideas of Origen and perpetuated the traditional Alexandrian theology. The didaskaleion acted as a center of knowledge and learning which Alexandria soon became known for. The only clues to Arius' early life come to scholars through his connection to Achillas, a former bishop of Alexandria (r. 312-313) and leader of the didaskaleion, and through his connection to the didaskaleion.²² Arius' connections to Achillas and the didaskaleion firmly set him in the context of the traditional Alexandrian thought. Whatever Arius' past may have been the historical Arius of the Trinitarian conflict appears firmly grounded in Alexandria.²³ Arius was made deacon by

²⁰J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 134-135

²¹ Rowan Williams, *Arius*, 30.

²² Antonio Orbe, "Alexander and Arius of Alexandria," 395.

²³ Rowan Williams, *Arius*, 31.

Peter, the bishop of Alexandria (r. 300-311).²⁴ Later, Arius was accepted into the ranks of the presbyterium, among the Alexandrian priests, due to Achillas. When Arius was in his fifties he was appointed, by Alexander, to the parish of Baucalis, near the harbor of Alexandria, which contained a large and active Christian population.²⁵

The Alexandria that Arius entered into and was a part of had many problems. First, Alexandria was a divided church, due to persecutions and theological disputes.²⁶ The structure of the Alexandrian see allowed for many divisions to form. The Alexandrian see presided over a large area with many different groups, and even within the city of Alexandria the bishop faced opposition from the presbyterium. Alexandria had a unique parish system which gave presbyters great control within the city. Only in Alexandria did the Bishop delegate his pastoral powers to other presbyters who preached, interpreted scripture, and at times administered baptism and reconciliation.²⁷

Alexandria was split into five districts along very clear dividing lines which may have encouraged a diverse leadership of the city from the very beginning. The plurality of churches within Alexandria suggests that the beginnings of Christianity within the city were diverse and did not grow up under a single congregation controlled by the bishop. Evidence of many different congregations is evident in the Gnostic influences within the city and extracanonical literature that has survived within the city. The assigning of regular presbyters to local congregations was an attempt by the bishop to cement the many different groups together. However, the presbyters were not docile subjects to the bishop; instead they were members of

²⁴Rowan Williams, *Arius*, 36.

²⁵Antonio Orbe, "Alexander and Arius of Alexandria," 395.

²⁶J. Rebecca Lyman, "Arius and Arians," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* ed. Susan A. Harvey and David G. Hunter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 241.

²⁷ Antonio Orbe, "Alexander and Arius of Alexandria," 395.

the collegiate body and often came into conflict with the bishop over the extent of their power.²⁸

Alexandria was uniquely primed for the Arian beliefs to flourish.

The divisions within Alexandria were exacerbated by the persecutions that occurred at the beginning of the fourth century. In the February of 303 Diocletian, the Emperor of Rome, initiated a persecution of Christians which proved to be the most serious and sustained persecution that Christianity had endured to that point. When Diocletian abdicated in 305 his Caesar, Galerius, took command and the situation deteriorated further. Galerius was fanatically anti-Christian and with his second in command, Maximin, stationed in Egypt the persecution continued uninterrupted, until Licinius (r. 308-324) seized power in the east, in 313.²⁹ The persecutions created a prime opportunity for divisions within the church to form. It is important to see how the divisions within Alexandria occurred because they give precedence for presbyters to break away and because the divisions set the stage for the unique circumstances which lead to the Arian controversy.

Many bishops suffered during the persecutions and some apostatized, like Appollonius of Lycopolis. The prolonged absence of a bishop from his Diocese could create obvious problems so many of the bishops who were imprisoned during the persecutions appointed visitors, who acted as substitute bishops and watched over the imprisoned bishop's sees. The visitors saw to the relief of the poor and to the preaching of the faith. At some point in late 305 or early 306 four imprisoned bishops wrote to Melitius bishop of Lycopolis (r. 305-332), the successor of Appollonius. Melitius had entered the bishops' diocese and begun ordaining new clergy. Bishops complained that Melitius had no right to enter their dioceses because there was no lack of religious supervision, with all the visitors appointed throughout the dioceses. Also, the bishops

²⁸ Rowan Williams, *Arius*, 44.

²⁹ Rowan Williams, *Arius*, 32-33.

claimed that he had ordained, "Unsuitable and factious people."³⁰ The bishops stated that a bishop from outside the diocese could not judge the suitability of candidates in an unfamiliar diocese. After Melitius had received and read the letters he did not respond to the bishops or go to Peter, the bishop of Alexandria who was in hiding. Instead, after the bishops, presbyters, and deacons had been martyred Melitius entered Alexandria. Some sources report that once inside of Alexandria Melitius met two men, Arius and Isidore, who wanted to be teachers and decided to help him. Arius and Isidore pointed out where the presbyters, who had been delegated by Peter to watch over the city, were hiding. Melitius sent a note notifying the presbyters of charges against them and excommunicated the presbyters. Arius and Isidore were also able to tell Melitius that the visitors had gone into hiding, giving Melitius an excuse to suspend them.³¹ By the time Alexander became the bishop of Alexandria, in 313, nearly half of the clergy normally submitted to the Alexandrian bishop followed Meletius.³²

It is important to note that scholars question whether the Arius mentioned, as helping Melitius, is the same Arius who is involved in the Trinitarian conflict. Whether or not the account is true Melitius did take full advantage of the disorder in the church between 306 and 311 to establish a firmly rooted rival jurisdiction. Eventually Peter, the bishop of Alexandria, returned and excommunicated Meletius. As recounted by Sozomen Arius opposed Peter I's sanctions against Melitius.³³ According to the account Arius was excommunicated by Peter but was able to make his peace with Achillas, the bishop of Alexandria following Peter, who reinstated Arius. However, Sozomon is the only source which reports this information and it is not clear if Sozomon is an entirely truthful source. If the source is true though it could have some

³⁰ Rowan Williams, *Arius*, 33.

³¹ Rowan Williams, *Arius*, 33-34.

³² Antonio Orbe, "Alexander and Arius of Alexandria," 393.

³³ Antonio Orbe, "Alexander and Arius of Alexandria," 395.

interesting implications. The Melitian's joined with the anti-Niceans which may have been because Arius had originally had strong ties to the group. Another possibility stemming from the connection involves Meletius directly. Meletius was one of the first people to denounce Arius' heresy to Alexander, who became the bishop of Alexandria in 312. Meletius' actions could be seen as a late revenge for Arius' desertion.³⁴ It is possible Arius gained a strong group of supporters by helping Meletius out but even if the stories about Arius helping Meletius are not true, Meletius created a strong division in the Alexandrian church which made the Bishops authority weaker and made it more viable for other groups to break away.³⁵

The Bishop of Alexandria in the fourth century occupied a paradoxical role in Christianity. On one side the bishop was seen as an archbishop or even a patriarch. From the time of Dionysius the Patriarch was referred to as Papa. The bishop appeared to have the right to appoint commissaries in vacant sees. There is also good evidence to suggest that the bishop also consecrated other Egyptian bishops and nominated other bishops. However, on the other hand, within Alexandria the bishop was surrounded by strong independent presbyters who watch over their own congregations. The system was set up with the bishop as the head of near equals. Until Athanasius' ascension in 328, the Alexandrian presbyteral college consecrated the new bishop of Alexandria without any other bishops present. Despite having unusually strong powers outside of Alexandria, within the city the bishop had much less power than a normal bishop.³⁶

Colluthus was a clergy member who at some point began to preach to his own congregation. Colluthus much like Meletius was engaging in schismatic activity from the Alexandrian bishop. Prior to the Arian crisis there was a group of people who called themselves Colluthians. Colluthus used the Arian crisis as an excuse to continue in schismatic behavior.

³⁴ Rowan Williams, *Arius*, 36-38.

³⁵ Antonio Orbe, "Alexander and Arius of Alexandria," 393.

³⁶ Rowan Williams, *Arius*, 42.

Colluthus at one point even began to ordain his own clergy. Colluthus thought of himself as a bishop and reminded the Alexandrian clergy of the ongoing problem with Melitius. Colluthus represented the extreme opposite theological view from Arius. Colluthus' views were almost a type of Monarchianism and Alexander's views would be almost as suspect as Arius'. Arius and Colluthus may have been enemies but Arius had in Colluthus a precedent for resisting a bishop that was seen as heretical.³⁷

The problems and fractions in the Alexandrian church were likely caused by a whole scale collapse of the church's main institutions. The Bishop's power was being challenged all along the Nile valley by rebelling bishops and Monastic orders withdrawing from the church. Also, the famous Alexandrian schooling system had collapsed. The didaskaleion was closed and never reopened under Alexander's rule. The lack of an educational system to foster the higher intellectual education, so praised in Alexandria, resulted in an immediate drop in the openness of the whole Christian community. Many modern German critics focus on Alexander's own poor education, which was also a factor in reducing the intellectual level of the Alexandrian community. It is possible that Alexander tried to supplement for the lack of a formal school by appointing Arius, a former member of the Didaskaleion. It is possible that Alexander appointed the well educated Arius, a man he held in high esteem,³⁸ to a high ranking position in order for him to become an intellectual leader in the Alexandrian community.³⁹

It is also important to note that a new phenomenon had begun in Alexandria, the beginnings of monasticism. Many intellectual energies were dragged out into the desert. Antony the Hermit (c. 251-356) set a precedent for a new kind of religious order but continued to uphold the Alexandrian theological history. Antony's letters were filled with ideas from Origen and

³⁷ Rowan Williams, *Arius*, 45-46.

³⁸ Antonio Orbe, "Alexander and Arius of Alexandria," 391.

³⁹ Antonio Orbe, "Alexander and Arius of Alexandria," 396-397.

adhered to the traditional Alexandrian theology.⁴⁰ It is easy to see how many scholars may have been attracted to monasteries with the reduction of an intellectual community in Alexandria and the closing of the didaskaleion.

Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, had divisions within his own city but he also had problems with the areas outside of Alexandria over which he presided. The Alexandrian bishopric had historically extended its influence over a large area including Libya, the birthplace of Arius. Many of the outlying regions that were part of the Alexandrian see were resistant to the control placed over them by the bishop of Alexandria. When the Arian controversy began, it was clear that Libya, a province already resistant to control from Alexandria, might support a Libyan priest, Arius, who had fallen out of grace with the Alexandrian bishop.⁴¹

Alexandria was a cauldron just waiting to boil over and in the year 318 the volatile mixture exploded. Alexander (r. 313-328) attempted to solidify the power of the bishop within Alexandria, which had previously delegated large powers to the presbyters. However, with the split caused by Meletius Alexander may have felt that the city needed more leadership than in the past. Also, the recent persecutions had reduced the number intellectual Christians within Alexandria. This view became particularly likely with the closing of the didaskaleion, which had trained many of the intellectuals. Alexander began to take over the theological leadership of the local church community and began to preach a new and innovative form of theology within Alexandria. Alexander was not so much a learned academic accustomed to addressing other intellectuals as he was, a preacher expressing his views to ordinary lay people.⁴² Alexander's lack of education is a very important point because it shows a divide between Arius and Alexander. Arius was part of the "school" community, which dealt with speculative issues of Christianity,

⁴⁰ Antonio Orbe, "Alexander and Arius of Alexandria," 397.

⁴¹ Rowan Williams, *Arius*, 29.

⁴² Antonio Orbe, "Alexander and Arius of Alexandria," 398.

and allowed for independent presbyters to create their own views. Arius' views ran up against the views of Alexander. Alexander was attempting to increase the authority of the bishop. Arius can be seen as trying to hold on to the "school" tradition, while Alexander was trying to create a monarchical bishopric as had occurred in other regions around the Christian world.⁴³ This clash of values resulted in an inevitable controversy between Arius and Alexander.

Alexander, in the year 318, may have become aware of Arius' differing views on the Trinity, because Alexander called together the clergy within Alexandria and questioned them on their views of Christ the Son to God the Father. Most of the clergy expressed the view that Christ was co-eternal and equal with the father, but Arius and some of his supporters expressed the view that Christ was subordinate to the father and not co-eternal.⁴⁴ As expressed earlier Arius was a conservative theologian deeply rooted in the tradition of Alexandrian theology. Arius could not accept Alexander's teaching from the pulpit a form of Trinitarian theology which offended his entire understanding of the Alexandrian tradition.⁴⁵ As part of the "school" tradition Arius believed that one should not innovate in Trinitarian matters from the pulpit, instead such matters were meant for discussion among other academics.⁴⁶ Arius may have been encouraged by the fact that he had been a rival for the position of bishop in Alexandria.⁴⁷ Even if Arius had not been made bishop he still may have seen it as his responsibility to correct the, less educated, bishop of any mistakes he was making.

When Arius began to preach publicly in 318, he was very successful. Arius' old age and ascetic virtues won over many Christians, particularly virgins who admired his ascetic virtues.

⁴³J. Rebecca Lyman, "Arius and Arians," 241.

⁴⁴ Charles M. Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire* (2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2004), 190.

⁴⁵ Antonio Orbe, "Alexander and Arius of Alexandria," 398.

⁴⁶ Antonio Orbe, "Alexander and Arius of Alexandria," 392.

⁴⁷J. Rebecca Lyman, "Arius and Arians," 242.

As Arius had been more inclined to elaborate his theology within the inner circles of his followers, his views were not well known throughout Alexandria. So, when Arius began to preach to the public he secured himself a large audience receptive to his views.⁴⁸

Alexander, demanded that Arius repent but Arius, convinced he was right, refused. Alexander worked quickly to try and quell Arius by calling a synod, at Alexandria, of nearly one hundred Egyptian and Libyan bishops, most likely in 318. The synod excommunicated Arius and his followers and anathematized their views.⁴⁹ Instead of backing down Arius began to look for supporters. Arius in particular received support from Eusebius of Caesarea and Eusebius of Nicomedia. Eusebius of Caesarea was the intellectual heir to Origen.⁵⁰ By gaining Eusebius of Caesarea as an ally Arius further put himself in line with Origen and the traditional theology of Alexandria. Eusebius of Nicomedia was the Episcopal advisor of Licinius, the current Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire. Arius managed to gain strong supporters who would help him to defend his beliefs.

Both of the Eusebiuses wrote to bishop Alexander and other bishops around the empire reaffirming Arius' orthodoxy and asking that he be restored to communion. Alexander no longer trusted Arius and did not like outside influences meddling in the affairs of his see. Alexander wrote a circular letter which he sent to bishops all over the empire declaring Arius a heretic and outlining his heresy. In response Eusebius called a Bithynian synod which affirmed Arius' teachings and communicated its decision to Bishop Alexander. In 321, Eusebius of Nicomedia led Arius and his supporters to Palestine where he asked Eusebius of Caesarea to call a council. The council accepted the moderate subordinationist positions that Arius had been espousing on

⁴⁸ Antonio Orbe, "Alexander and Arius of Alexandria," 399.

⁴⁹David J Ray, "Nicaea and its Aftermath: A Historical Survey of the First Ecumenical Council and the Ensuing Conflicts," *Ashland Theological Journal* 39 (2007): 21.

⁵⁰Charles Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 191

his travels. The council suggested that Arius submit to his bishop and that Alexander readmit Arius. However, it was around the year 321 that the Licinian persecutions began, along with a ban on Episcopal travel, which stopped the Arian conflict from being resolved by any form of council.⁵¹ Licinius banned bishops from traveling outside of their provinces and from attending Episcopal councils. The ban on Episcopal councils was particularly vexing because, councils had become the norm for regulating church beliefs and practices.⁵²

In order to understand the outcome of the Arian controversy it is important to understand the events which led up to the Council of Nicaea, where the Arian controversy was settled. In the year 324 Constantine (r. 306-337) defeated Licinius and put an end to the Christian persecutions in the east, along with unifying the Roman Empire under one Emperor. However, Constantine was distressed to find that the Christian faith which he had hoped would bind his empire together was split. Constantine was worried that a split in Christianity would lead to political instability, particularly from pagans.⁵³ The Arian controversy had not disappeared during the persecution, between the years 321-324. As soon as the persecutions ended pamphlet campaigns and public commotions began all throughout the east. In early 325, Constantine sent Ossius of Cordova (c. 257-359), Constantine's Catholic advisor, to Alexandria to deliver a message asking for Alexander and Arius to settle their disputes for the good of the whole Christian world. Arius and Alexander refused to settle their disputes, which Constantine and Ossius had probably expected. Constantine probably came into, the Arian debate supporting Alexander, with the view that Christ was fully God and that presbyters should obey their superiors. Ossius called a synod at Alexandria, where he sided with Alexander against Arius and forced Colluthus, to return to his position as a priest, instead of a bishop. Immediately following the synod at Alexandria, Ossius

⁵¹ Charles Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 192.

⁵² Charles Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 153.

⁵³ David Ray, "Nicaea and its Aftermath," 21.

traveled to Antioch and called a council at Antioch where the bishops issued a statement of faith which supported Alexander's views and anathematized Arius' views. Ossius and fifty five bishops signed the creed, only three bishops refused to sign, one of which was Eusebius of Caesarea. The bishops were provisionally excommunicated and told that they would be given the chance to make their case again at the council in Ancyra, which Constantine moved to Nicaea.⁵⁴ It quickly became clear, that Ossius, a bishop from Spain, had a clearly western theological view which did not bode well for Arius.⁵⁵ Constantine and Ossius had set the stage for the Council of Nicaea in favor of Alexander.

Before examining the final outcome of the Arian controversy at the Council of Nicaea, it is important to look at some of the letters and works that were written during the controversy. The letter that is usually cited as the first document in the Arian conflict is Arius' letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, which was written around the year 318. In this letter Arius presents his case to Eusebius after he has been anathematized. In this letter Arius sets up the basis of his disagreement with Pope Alexander and calls on Eusebius, as a fellow Lucianist, to help in Arius' cause. First this letter makes it clear that the Alexandrian bishop does hold a special place within the Church hierarchy, because even Arius, who had just been excommunicated, refers to Alexander as the Pope. Within the letter Arius also makes it clear that Alexander's public speeches were the cause of Arius' actions. Arius claims that they are persecuted because they do not agree with Alexander, "When he says in Public,... "Ever-begotten , ungenerated-created, neither in thought nor in some moment of time does God proceed the Son," "Always God always Son," "The Son is from God himself.""⁵⁶ Arius makes it clear that the public nature of

⁵⁴ Charles Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 193.

⁵⁵ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 232.

⁵⁶ Arius, "Arius' Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia," in *The Trinitarian Controversy*, ed. William Rusch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 31.

Alexander's message along with the content of it are disagreeable to him. The main points of contrast between Alexander and Arius are whether the Son has always coexisted with God and whether the Son and God are of the same substance. Arius makes it clear that he is persecuted because he believes that the son has a beginning but God is without beginning and because he believes that the Son came from nothing, not from the father.⁵⁷ If Arius firmly believed that the son had a beginning then it is easy to see why the phrases above would force him to rebel against Alexander's teachings. Arius' letter makes it clear what the causes of the controversy are and makes it clear that Arius intends to resist Alexander.

The next letter discussed is a letter written by Arius to Alexander of Alexandria. This letter was written in 320 following Arius' excommunication. The letter is an attempt by Arius to explain his theology to Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria. The letter like many of the works from Arius was preserved by Athanasius, an opponent of Arius during the Council of Nicaea. Athanasius was an openly hostile source and calls many of Arius' writings propaganda and insults them in other ways.⁵⁸ While the information does come from a hostile source and requires close scrutiny, it can still provide important information. In Arius' letter to Alexander he claims his faith through his forefathers and claims to have learned from Alexander himself. Arius in this letter states his basic beliefs. Arius claims he believes in one God who alone is ingenerate and alone everlasting. Arius claims he believes that God begat an only-begotten son before time. Through the Son, God created both the ages and the Universe. Arius makes it clear that he does not believe in the ideas of Sabellius, Valentius, Manichaeus, nor Hieracas, all heretics whose ideas had been discredited. Arius claims that there are three substances, rather than one uniting substance. God is the cause of all things and hence is solely unbegun. The son was created

⁵⁷ Arius, "Arius' Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia," 31.

⁵⁸ J. Rebecca Lyman, "Arius and Arians," 240.

outside of time but was still created and is not co-eternal. Arius also set up his theory of subordinationism in this letter. Arius states that God is before the Son and that all things are bestowed upon the Son from God. Arius also, makes it clear that the Son does not share his being with God he is separate.⁵⁹ It is not exactly clear what Arius believed of Jesus the man because no sources have been preserved on the subject. Arius' view shares the view that the Son was changeable, just like adoptionism but it is not clear if Arius believed Jesus was merely a man who received God's grace.⁶⁰ Arius' letter ends by saying, "I pray that you are well in the Lord, Blessed Pope."⁶¹ If Arius had been the instigator of the conflict would he have pleaded to Eusebius of Nicomedia as the one wronged or written to Alexander in such formal terms, continuing to call him Pope? Arius did not want to create a schism within the Church but at the same time he could not forgo his beliefs. This letter was probably written with the hope that Alexander would see the validity of Arius' beliefs and end the conflict. This letter is important because it lays out Arius basic beliefs and shows that Arius believed that he was continuing on the religion of his forefathers.

Athanasius, the deacon of Alexander during the conflict, speaks of Arius' *Thalia*, a poem explaining Arius theology, in Book 1 of Athanasius' *Orations against the Arians*. The *Thalia* gives some evidence towards what Arius believed but once again it is placed within a hostile source. Athanasius describes Arius' *Thalia* as, "Flippant, with its effeminate manner and melody."⁶² Throughout the *Orations* Athanasius continues to treat Arius' ideas as a Joke and claims that anyone who reads Arius' jesting should hate him. Athanasius deals with some of

⁵⁹ Arius, "Arius' Letter to Alexander of Alexandria," 31.

⁶⁰ Rowan Williams, *Arius*, 162.

⁶¹ Arius, "Arius' Letter to Alexander of Alexandria," 32.

⁶² Athanasius, "Athanasius's Orations Against the Arians, Book 1," 66.

Arius' ideas, such as Arius' claim that, "The Word is not true God."⁶³ In other words that the word is not of the same substance as God and cannot see God. Like all other creatures the Son can only see God proportionally to his own measure. Athanasius addresses the issue but ends by stating who could believe any of Arius' fables written down in a laughable document.⁶⁴ With such a hostile author preserving Arius' writings it can be hard to discern if Arius' ideas are preserved in their true form.

Alexander's letters do not carry the same sort of respect towards Arius, which Arius' letters carry towards Alexander. For example Alexander of Alexandria's letter to Alexander of Thessalonica, written in 324 as a warning against Arius and his supporters, begins by saying, "The ambitions and covetous calculations of rascally men has produced plots against the apparently greater dioceses."⁶⁵ Alexander presents Arius as a man who had plotted to overthrow Alexander for his own political gains. Alexander warns the other bishops throughout the Roman Empire against helping Arius or allowing his influence to spread into their sees.⁶⁶ Alexander much like Athanasius makes it a point to insult and incriminate Arius and his followers. Alexander shows no sign of wishing to make reconciliation with Arius. Arius' letters appear to be reconciliatory which lends to the belief that Arius did not choose to separate from the Alexandrian church but was instead forced to defend his beliefs after Alexander excommunicated Arius and anathematized his views.

At this point it is necessary to try and pin down what Arius and Alexander really believed. As stated above many of the things known about Arius come from hostile sources but scholars have done their best to try and identify what Arius really believed.

⁶³ Athanasius, "Athanasius's Orations Against the Arians, Book 1," 67.

⁶⁴ Athanasius, "Athanasius's Orations Against the Arians, Book 1," 68.

⁶⁵ Alexander of Alexandria, "Alexander of Alexandria's Letter to Alexander of Thessalonica," 33.

⁶⁶ Alexander of Alexandria, "Alexander of Alexandria's Letter to Alexander of Thessalonica," 35.

The main purpose of Arius' theology was to protect the uniqueness and utter transcendence of God, the unoriginate source of the entire universe.⁶⁷ Arius in his letter to Alexander states, "We acknowledge 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."⁶⁸ Arius believed that the Godhead was unique and indivisible, which means that the being of God cannot be shared. If God were to impart his being to another it would imply that God was divisible and subject to change. The Godhead is also unique which means that no other being can share its being. Therefore anything that exists must have been created out of nothing and not as a communication of God's being.⁶⁹ The philosophical reasoning seen in Arius' acceptance of creation from nothing can be seen in the philosophies of Irenaeus and Tertullian. Their philosophy stated that if something comes into being it must derive from either something or from nothing.⁷⁰

In order to understand Arius' understanding of the Son, there are four points that must be made. First, the Son must be a creature who God has created from nothing. To suggest that the Son is in any way a part of the Godhead would be to reduce the Godhead to physical categories. The Son is a perfect creature and not to be compared with other creatures but he is still a creature in that he wholly owes his being to the Father's will. Arius believed that the Son is not ingenerate and must belong to the contingent order.⁷¹

Secondly, since the Son is a creature he must have a beginning. In other words there was a time when God was alone. However, ever since the Synod of Antioch in 268 any theological

⁶⁷ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 227.

⁶⁸ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 227.

⁶⁹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 227.

⁷⁰ Reinhard Hubner, "The Word From Nothing," in *Doctrine and Philosophy in Early Christianity*, ed. by Christopher Stead (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2000), 671.

⁷¹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 228.

system without a preexistent cosmological Christ was considered suspect.⁷² In order to stay within the tradition of a preexistent Christ Arius placed the Son's creation before time. Arius believed that the Son was created before time, which should be presupposed as Arius believes that the Son created time itself along with everything else in the world. In other words, the Son was created before time, because as the agent of creation the Son created time itself. While Arius accepts that the Son was created before time he cannot accept him as coeternal with the Father, because that would presuppose two self-existent beings.⁷³

Thirdly the Son can have no communion with or knowledge of the Father.⁷⁴ The Son often referred to as the *Logos*, "Word" or "Wisdom", was not considered an appropriate name by Arius. Arius believed that the Son was endowed with a complexity of titles all of which must be taken together to express the Son's full being.⁷⁵ While the Son bears the titles of "Word" and "Wisdom" he is distinct from the word and wisdom which are within God. The Son shares these titles in that he participates in the word and the wisdom. However, the Son himself like all creatures is alien from the essences of the Father. As a finite being the Son cannot understand the infinite God. Like all creatures the son sees and knows God proportional to his capacity and power.⁷⁶ Human beings have been up against a tremendously difficult task to reach a transcendent God who is utterly different from them.⁷⁷ According to many *Logos* theologies, including Justin and Clement's theologies, the existence and subordination of the *Logos* was essential. A being that was equal to God would fail to act as a bridge or mediating force between the ineffable God and the rest of the world.⁷⁸

⁷² Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, *Early Arianism-A View of Salvation* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 2.

⁷³ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 228.

⁷⁴ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 228.

⁷⁵ Christopher Stead, "Arius on God's Many Words," *Journal of Theological Studies* 36 (1985): 156.

⁷⁶ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 229.

⁷⁷ Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), 54.

⁷⁸ McGowan, "The Shadow of Arius," 26.

The fourth part of Arius' beliefs was that, the Son must be capable of change and of sin. While it was possible for the Son to sin, Arius believed that God had foreseen that the Son would remain virtuous of his own resolution and God bestowed the Son with grace in advance.⁷⁹

Finally, Arius believed that the title of God or son of God when attributed to God's first creation were merely a courtesy titles. Arius believed that the Son is not true God but that through Grace he earns the honor of being called God in name only. In this way Arius could speak of the Triad as three separate persons.⁸⁰

In opposition to Arius' views Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, held differing views on the Trinity, which led to the Arian controversy. Alexander of Alexandria believed that the "Divine *Logos*" was eternally generated by the Godhead. In this way the *Logos* was Coeternal with the father. However, Alexander also believed that the Trinity was separated into three hypostases which all shared the same nature. Alexander believed that God was alone originate but that the word was coeternal, since God can never be without his word. In this way the sonship of the *Logos* is real and natural. The *Logos* instead of coming from nothing comes from the Father and is of the same being and substance as the Father.⁸¹

Arius and Alexander clearly had different theological views and in the time leading up to Nicaea it appeared that Alexander's position was being favored. Constantine had chosen to move the council from Ancyra to Nicaea because it was nearer the political capital and more accessible to western bishops. However, very few church leaders came from the west, where there was little interest in eastern conflicts. In June of 325 the First Ecumenical Council came under way with about three hundred bishops attending and nearly three or four times that number of associated clergy arrived at Nicaea. Eusebius of Nicomedia, an ally of Arius, welcomed the Emperor to

⁷⁹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 229.

⁸⁰ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 229.

⁸¹ William Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 18.

Nicaea. Constantine made it clear that the point of this council was reconciliation and peace between the Christian community. To make the point evident, Constantine burned the petitions he had been given by the bishops which held accusations against one another. Following Constantine's speech Ossius took control and acted as the official chair of the council.⁸²

The first item on the agenda for the council was the theological controversy between Arius and Alexander which had spread throughout the whole eastern Christian world. Ossius and Constantine made it obvious that they would allow all participants to voice their views.⁸³ If Arius was present at the council he was only able to play a minor role as a Presbyter. The bishops were the official representatives and voters.⁸⁴ Eusebius of Nicomedia began by reading a statement containing Arian positions. Eusebius' reading caused a negative reaction and clear disapproval from a majority of the council.⁸⁵ Even from the beginning of the council it became clear that Arianism was in the minority party. During the council it became apparent that three separate parties were forming. The groups probably centered around Arius' position, Alexander's position, and a third group which wished to retain the traditional *Logos* theology without taking a strongly anti-Arian position.⁸⁶ At some point during the Council of Nicaea, Eusebius of Caesarea was allowed to take the floor in order to try and redeem himself from his excommunication at the council of Antioch. Eusebius recited the Caesarean baptismal creed which was entirely Orthodox. Constantine quickly grasped onto the creed seeing that he might be able to use it as a compromise between the different parties. Eusebius was freed from the taint of heresy.⁸⁷

⁸² Charles Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 179.

⁸³ Charles Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 179.

⁸⁴ J. Rebecca Lyman, "Arius and Arians," 245.

⁸⁵ Charles Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 179.

⁸⁶ William Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 19.

⁸⁷ Charles Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 197.

At this point Constantine introduced the word *Homoousios* as part of the creed.⁸⁸ Constantine felt that the word would more clearly elucidate the unity and equality of Christ the Son with God the Father. Constantine asked for Eusebius of Caesarea's support and Eusebius reluctantly supported the word, which he knew had been used by important western and eastern theologians in an attempt to explain the nature and economy of God. The term, *homoousios*, literally means of the same substance. The Arians found the word unacceptable and the semi-Arian group proposed a new word, *homoiousios*. *Homoiousios* means of a like or similar substance, but not the same substance. However, some members of the council felt that *homoiousios* might open the door to the possibility of two Gods, and they felt that the word did nothing to establish a clear view of Christ's relationship and Authority with the Father.⁸⁹ Eventually the term *homoousios* was made part of the Nicene Creed. However, what is not known is whether the word was used in a generic way, as Origen had used it, or was the term meant to describe a numerical identity of substance? It is likely that many viewed the word in the generic sense, which allowed different groups to interpret the word in different ways agreeable to their own theology.⁹⁰ While the semi-Arians were willing to accept the term *homoousios* the word remained unacceptable for the Arians and the Anti Arian stance of the council can clearly be seen in the final creed that was established by the council. The Nicene Creed reads as follows,

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of all that is seen and unseen. And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the father, only begotten, that is, from the substance of the father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, one in being with the Father through whom all things came into being, both in heaven and things on earth. Who because of us men and because of our salvation he came down and became incarnate becoming man. He suffered and on the third day he rose again, he ascended into heaven. He will come again to judge the living and the dead, and

⁸⁸ Charles Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 197.

⁸⁹ David Ray, "Nicea and its Aftermath," 24.

⁹⁰ William Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 20.

we believe in the Holy Spirit. But as for those who say there was when he was not, and before being born he was not, and that he came into existence out of nothing or who assert that the son of God is of a different substance or essence, or is subject to alteration or change- those the Catholic and apostolic church anathematize.⁹¹

It is made clear in the creed that while Arianism is not specifically named all of the Arian beliefs are anathematized. The Creed begins by professing belief in a single God and his Son the Lord, which both fit with Arian beliefs. However, when the Creed states, “begotten from the father, only begotten, that is, from the substance of the father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, one in being with the Father,”⁹² it is clearly differentiating from Arius' belief that the Son was created and not from God, but from nothing, hence making the Son of a different substance than God. The phrase, “one in being with the Father,” clearly shows where the idea of *homoousios* was added to the Creed. The Creed goes on to state that they believe the Son came down and became incarnate in man which also agrees with Arian beliefs. The Creed expressed belief that Jesus, “suffered and on the third day he rose again, he ascended into heaven. He will come again to judge the living and the dead,” and that they believed in the Holy Spirit.⁹³ Arius' views were completely in line with many parts of the creed including the suffering, resurrection, and judgment involving the Son. However, at the end of the creed Arius' views are all anathematized. The Creed states, “as for those who say there was when he was not, and before being born he was not, and that he came into existence out of nothing or who assert that the son of God is of a different substance or essence, or is subject to alteration or change- those the Catholic and apostolic church anathematize.”⁹⁴ Arius' views of

⁹¹Charles Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 198.

⁹² Charles Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 198.

⁹³ Charles Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 198.

⁹⁴ Charles Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 198.

the Son having a time when he was not, of being created from nothing, of the Son being of a different substance than the Father, and of the Son's subjectivity to change were all anathematized.

Once the Creed had been drafted, it was made clear that any bishop wishing to retain his Episcopal rank needed to sign the creed. All of the bishops at Nicaea except for two lifelong friends of Arius signed the Creed. Arius and his allies were sent into exile and forbidden to return to their sees, so that they could not negatively influence true believers.⁹⁵

In the final analysis of this paper it is clear that, Arius was a classical Alexandrian theologian who firmly believed that he was carrying on the Orthodox views that he had been taught by a long line of the Churches forefathers, stretching back to Lucian, Origen, and even the apologists. Arius' connection to the didaskaleion strongly connects him to the intellectual and school legacy of Alexandria, which Alexander was beginning to challenge. Arius' conflict with Alexander was not an attempt to gain power but was a defense of the traditions that had been passed down to him his whole life. Arius' letters make it clear that while he refused to bend his beliefs he wished for reconciliation, while Alexander's beliefs make it clear that he wished for no reconciliation. From the outcome at the Council of Nicaea it is clear that most of the Church did not agree with Arius' views. Arius had been trained in a Christian theology that was distinctly unique to Alexandria and its surrounding area, so while Arius firmly believed he was following the Orthodox view, the wider Christian community was unfamiliar and hostile to the ideas they saw as being new and dangerous.

⁹⁵ Charles Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 199.

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