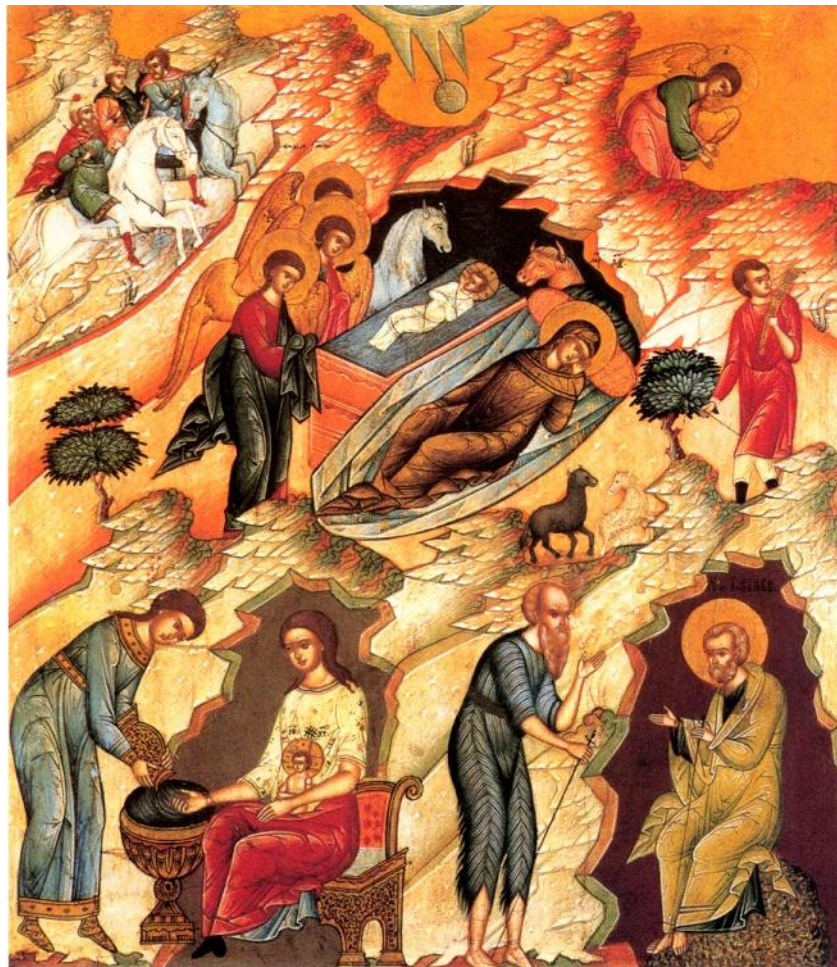


# THE INCARNATION OF THE WORD AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST ARIANISM



<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. (John 1:1-3)

## THE NATIVITY – WHY ARIUS WAS WRONG

The Incarnation of the Word - John 1:1-18 (New King James Version)

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. <sup>4</sup> In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. <sup>5</sup> And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend<sup>[a]</sup> it.

<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. <sup>8</sup> He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. <sup>9</sup> That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. <sup>11</sup> He came to His own,<sup>[c]</sup> and His own<sup>[d]</sup> did not receive Him. <sup>12</sup> But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: <sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

<sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

<sup>15</sup> John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, “This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.’”

<sup>16</sup> And<sup>[e]</sup> of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. <sup>17</sup> For the law was given through Moses, *but* grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup> No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son,<sup>[f]</sup> who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared *Him*.

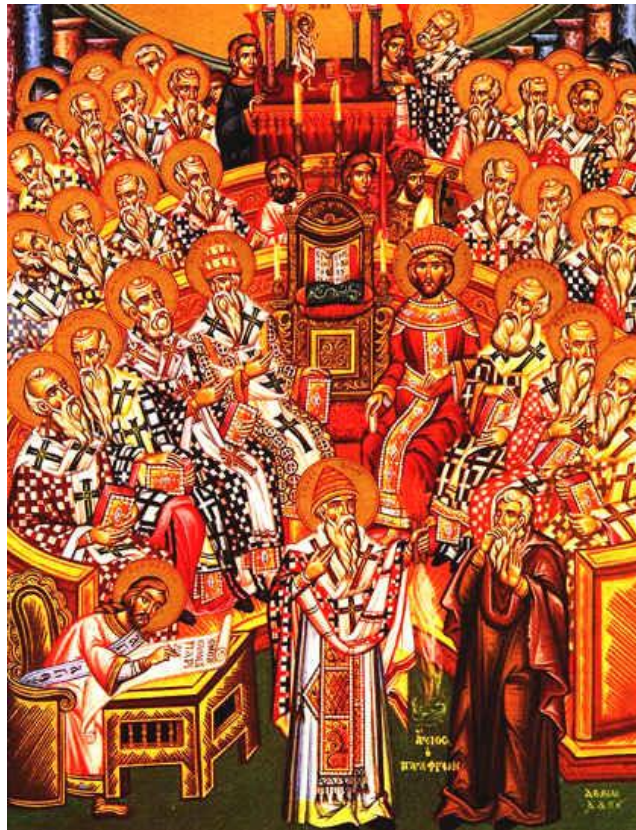
## PREFACE

The Incarnation is the vital heart of Orthodox Christianity. God Himself has come in the flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ, True God and True Man. Without this great fact of our faith we have no salvation. God came to share our life that we might share in His. That is what salvation is all about. Although John 1:1-18 is read at Pascha (Easter) in the Orthodox Church it is of course a great text for the Nativity (Christmas) as well. In it we read that Jesus is the Word, one in being with the Father, He through Whom all that is was made (John 1:3).

In the early Church (and also today) this central feature of the gospel, the good news was challenged and undermined in the 4<sup>th</sup> century by the Arians, followers of the heretic Arius in the great city of Alexandria. He did not believe that Jesus was true God and true Man but rather that he was the most exalted creation of the Father in time. As such Arius taught that Jesus could not be God as the Father was God. According to this teaching our salvation was not an act of God but an act of his created agent, Jesus .... and, therefore, this was not salvation at all because only God Himself can save. Salvation is not God “acting a distance” but in Christ getting personally involved AS GOD. This Arius denied and his teaching was condemned by the specially convened first Ecumenical Council in Nicaea in 325 AD. (Later this Council affirmed the Godhead of the Holy Spirit as well and made a final revision to the Creed in 381 AD).

Today there are still Arians and Arian-type believers in the world although you will know them better as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christadelphians and even many Protestant Christians in the mainline denominations. Arianism was and remains probably the most dangerous and corrosive false teaching in non-Orthodox Christian bodies. Although the Orthodox Church is secure in setting its face against this heresy we need continually to be on our guard against new variants of this ancient poison attempting to corrupt the gospel life of the Church.

## THE CREED OF NICAEA-CONSTANTINOPLE (325 > 381 AD)



**W**e believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-begotten, Begotten of the Father before all ages, Light of Light, True God of True God, Begotten, not made, of one essence with the Father, by Whom all things were made:

Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man;

And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried;  
And the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures;  
And ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of the Father;  
And He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, Whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, and Giver of Life, Who proceedeth from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, Who spoke by the Prophets;

And we believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins.  
We look for the Resurrection of the dead,  
And the Life of the age to come. Amen.

## **ARIUS AND ARIANISM**



Arius (AD ca250/256 - 336, of Alexandria) was an early Christian theologian, who taught that the Son of God was not eternal, and was subordinate to God the Father (a view known generally as Arianism). Although he attracted considerable support at the time (and since), Arius's views were declared heretical at the Council of Nicaea, leading to the formation of the Nicene Creed. Arius is also known as Arius of Alexandria.

## Problems with sources

Reconstructing the life and teachings of Arius can be problematic and controversial. None of Arius' writings are extant; many were destroyed by his opponents. Indeed, our only record of his teaching is found in writings of those who opposed him and denounced him as a heretic - sources which are obviously far from dispassionate. Yet these, as the only surviving references to him, are all the scholars have. These few remaining works credited to him are Epiphanius' recordings of his letter to Alexander of Alexandria, Theodoret's recording of his letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, and Athanasius' recording of fragments of Thalia, a popularized work combining prose and verse.

## Early life and personality

He was possibly of Libyan and Berber descent. His father's name is given as Ammonius. He was made presbyter of the district of Baucalis in Alexandria in 313. Although the character of Arius has been severely assailed by his opponents, Arius appears to have been a man of personal ascetic character, pure morals, and decided convictions. Warren H. Carroll (paraphrasing Epiphanius of Salamis, an opponent of Arius) describes him as "tall and lean, of distinguished appearance and polished address. Women doted on him, charmed by his beautiful manners, touched by his appearance of asceticism. Men were impressed by his aura of intellectual superiority." [1]

## Arius starts a controversy

The historian Socrates Scholasticus reports that Arius first became controversial under the bishop Achillas of Alexandria, when he made the following syllogism: "'If,' said he, 'the Father begat the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence: and from this it is evident, that there was a time when the Son was not. It therefore necessarily follows, that he had his substance from nothing.'" (Thus his actions were not the result of any jealousy on account of his unsuccessful candidacy for the patriarchate of Alexandria in rivalry with Alexander.)

It is believed that Arius' doctrines were influenced by the teachings of Lucian of Antioch, a celebrated Christian teacher and martyr for the faith. In a letter to Bishop Alexander of Constantinople, Alexander of Alexandria wrote that Arius derived his theology from Lucian. The express purpose of his letter is to complain of the doctrines Arius was then diffusing but his charge of heresy against Arius is vague and unsupported by other authorities, and Alexander's language, like that of most

controversialists in those days, is vituperative. Moreover, Lucian is not stated, even by Alexander himself, to have fallen into the heresy afterwards promulgated by Arius, but is accused ad invidiam of heretical tendencies.

The patriarch of Alexandria was the subject of adverse criticism for his slow reaction against Arius. Like his predecessor Dionysius, he has been charged with vacillation. Yet it is difficult to see how he could have acted otherwise than he did. The question that Arius raised had been left unsettled two generations previously, or, if in any sense it could be said to have been settled, it had been settled in favour of the opponents of the homoousion. Therefore Alexander allowed the controversy to continue until he felt that it had become dangerous to the peace of the Church. Then he called a council of bishops and sought their advice. Once they decided against Arius, Alexander delayed no longer. He deposed Arius from his office, and excommunicated both him and his supporters.

## Arius' doctrines

In explaining his actions against Arius, Alexander of Alexandria wrote a letter to Alexander of Constantinople and Eusebius of Nicomedia (where the emperor was then residing), detailing the errors into which he believed Arius had fallen, and complaining of the danger he believed Arius presented to the Church. According to Alexander, Arius taught:

"That God was not always the Father, but that there was a period when he was not the Father; that the Word of God was not from eternity, but was made out of nothing; for that the ever-existing God ('the I AM'—the eternal One) made him who did not previously exist, out of nothing; wherefore there was a time when he did not exist, inasmuch as the Son is a creature and a work. That he is neither like the Father as it regards his essence, nor is by nature either the Father's true Word, or true Wisdom, but indeed one of his works and creatures, being erroneously called Word and Wisdom, since he was himself made of God's own Word and the Wisdom which is in God, whereby God both made all things and him also. Wherefore he is as to his nature mutable and susceptible of change, as all other rational creatures are: hence the Word is alien to and other than the essence of God; and the Father is inexplicable by the Son, and invisible to him, for neither does the Word perfectly and accurately know the Father, neither can he distinctly see him. The Son knows not the nature of his own essence: for he was made on our account, in order that God might create us by him, as by an instrument; nor would he ever have existed, unless God had wished to create us." He states something similar in Thalia:

"God has not always been Father; there was a moment when he was alone, and was not yet Father: later he became so. The Son is not from eternity; he came from nothing.[2]

## Arius's concept of Christ

This question of the exact relationship between the Father and the Son, a part of Christology, had been raised some 50 years before Arius, when Paul of Samosata was deposed in AD 269 for his agreement with those who had used the word homoousios (Greek for same substance) to express the relation of the Father and the Son. The expression was at that time thought to have a Sabellian tendency, though, as events showed, this was on account of its scope not having been satisfactorily defined. In the discussion which followed, Dionysius, Patriarch of Alexandria, had used much the same language as Arius did later, and correspondence survives in which Pope Dionysius blames his brother of Alexandria for using such language. Dionysius of Alexandria responded with an explanation, which posterity has been inclined to interpret as vacillating. So far as the earlier controversy could be said to have been decided, it was decided in favour of the opinions later championed by Arius. But this settlement was so unsatisfactory that the question would have been reopened sooner or later, especially in an atmosphere so intellectual as that of Alexandria. For the synod of Antioch which condemned Paul of Samosata had expressed its disapproval of the word homoousios in one sense, and Patriarch Alexander undertook its defense in another.

Arius formulated the following doctrines about Jesus:

- that the Logos and the Father were not of the same essence (ousia);

- that the Son was a created being (ktisma or poiema);
- and that though He was the creator of the worlds, and must therefore have existed before them and before all time, there was a "time" [although Arius refused to use words meaning time, such as chronos or aion] when He did not exist.

The subsequent controversy shows that Arius' avoidance of the words chronos and aion was adroit; when defending himself he clearly argued that there was a time when the Son did not exist. Moreover, he asserted that the Logos had a beginning. By way of contrast, Origen had taught that the relation of the Son to the Father had no beginning and that, to use Dorner's words (Person of Christ, ii. 115), "the generation of the Son is an eternally completed, and yet an eternally continued, act" - or in other words, the Father has, from all eternity, been communicating His Being to the Son, and is doing so still. However, Arius seems to have further support in his view as his is purely intellectual, whereas those claiming the eternity of the "begotten" (i.e. created, made, or produced) Son need textual revelation to back their belief, which they have not been able to gather.

Arius was obviously perplexed by this doctrine, for he complains of it in his letter to the Nicomedian Eusebius, who, like himself, had studied under Lucian. It is to be regretted that so much stress should have been laid in the controversy on words, but this is understood under the influence of Greek philosophical thought, with concepts such as "substance" that are alien to the Jewish religious experience of the Divine. Arius also contended that the Son was unchangeable (atreptos). But what he thus gave with the one hand he appears to have taken away with the other. For so far as we can understand his language on a subject which Athanasius seems to have admitted that it was beyond his power thoroughly to comprehend - he taught that the Logos was changeable in Essence, but not in Will. The best authorities consider that he was driven to this concession by the force of circumstances. He was doubtless confirmed in his attitude by his fear of falling into Sabellianism. Bishop Macedonius, who had to a certain extent imbibed the opinions of Arius, certainly regarded the Son and the Spirit in much the same way that the Gnostic teachers regarded their aeons. Arius undoubtedly drew some support from the writings of Origen, who had made use of expressions which favoured Arius's statement that the Logos was of a different substance to the Father, and that He owed His existence to the Father's will. But the speculations of Origen were then, as well as currently, considered as pioneer work in theology, often hazarded to stimulate further inquiry rather than to enable men to dispense with it. This explains why in this, as well as other controversies, the authority of Origen is so frequently invoked by both sides.

## Wider Church reaction and The Council of Nicaea



The Christian church had by this time become so powerful a force in the Roman world that Constantine found himself unable to keep aloof from the controversy. He therefore sent Hosius, bishop of Córdoba-the one who reportedly instructed him in the faith just before his march to Rome--

to investigate and to put an end, if possible, to the controversy, armed with an open letter from the Emperor: "Wherefore let each one of you, showing consideration for the other, listen to the impartial exhortation of your fellow-servant." But as it continued to rage, Constantine took an unprecedented step: he called a council of delegates, summoned from all parts of the empire, to resolve this issue (possibly at Hosius' recommendation[3]).

All of the secular dioceses into which the empire had been divided, Roman Britain only excepted, sent one or more representatives to the council, the majority of the bishops coming from the East. Pope Sylvester I, himself too aged to be present, sent two presbyters as his delegates. The object of the council, it must be remembered, was not to pronounce what the church ought to believe, but to ascertain as far as possible what had been taught from the beginning. It was indeed a remarkable gathering: there was not only as good a representation of race and nationality as was possible under the circumstances, but the ability and intellect of the church were also well represented. There was the already mentioned Eusebius of Nicomedia, and Alexander, patriarch of Alexandria. There was also the historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, as well as the young Athanasius, who was to eventually spend most of his life battling Arianism. And beside these there were other men present, the brave "confessors," as they were called, whose faces and limbs bore evident traces of the sufferings they had undergone for their faith. The emperor did his best to secure an honest selection and an honest decision.

This was the First Council of Nicaea, which met in 325, near Constantinople. Some twenty-two of the bishops at the council, led by Eusebius of Nicomedia, came as supporters of Arius. But when some of the more shocking passages from his writings were read, they were almost universally seen as blasphemous.[4] Under the influence of the emperor Constantine, the assembled bishops agreed upon a creed to be used at baptisms and in catechetical instruction. This creed, which is known as the Nicene creed specifically included the word homoousios--"consubstantial," or "one in being,"-- which was incompatible with the beliefs of Arius.[5] On June 19, 325, both council and emperor issued a circular letter to the churches in and around Alexandria. Arius and two unyielding supporters (Theonas, and Secundus [6]) were deposed and exiled to Illyricum, while three other bishops, who had also been supportive of Arius, namely Eusebius of Nicomedia, Theognis of Nicaea, and Maris of Chalcedon, were unwilling signatories of the document, but affixed their signatures in deference to the emperor. However, Constantine found some reason to suspect the sincerity of Eusebius of Nicomedia, as well as that of Theognis and Maris, for he soon after included them in the sentence pronounced on Arius. Eusebius of Caesarea defended himself in a letter as having objected to the changes in the creed which he had originally presented, but finally accepted them in the interests of peace (Theod. H. E. i. 12).

## After the Council of Nicaea

That the public unanimity of the council (Secundus and Theonas of Lower Egypt being the only dissenters) masked a considerable amount of divergent opinion is indisputable. Doubts over the use of a term which had been previously denounced as Sabellian weighed on the minds of many. Eusebius of Caesarea has been charged by many later writers as having embraced Arianism. But his moderate attitude throughout the following period suggests that his objections to the decision, which he allowed his love of peace to overrule, owed more to the dread of possible consequences than to the decision in itself. And his allusion to the proceedings at Nicaea in the letter just mentioned shows that his apprehensions were not altogether unreasonable. For he remarks how the final consensus emerged after considerable discussion that the term homoousion was not intended to indicate that the Son formed an actual portion of the Father - which would have been Sabellianism pure and simple, a fear which fed much of the dissension to the adoption of the creed. On the other hand, Athanasius was convinced that unless the essence of the Son was definitely understood to be the same as that of the Father, it would inevitably follow that the Son would at best be no more than the highest of a series of Gnostic aeons.

The homoousian party's victory at Nicaea was short-lived, however. The controversy recommenced as soon as the decrees were promulgated. When Alexander died at Alexandria in 327, the election of Athanasius in his place was secured despite his not meeting the age requirement for a bishop. Soon after, Eusebius of Nicomedia was reinstated in his see, after having written a diplomatic letter to the

emperor. Arius, who had taken refuge in Palestine, was also soon permitted to return, after reformulating his Christology in an effort to mute the ideas his opponents found most objectionable. It was not long before the Nicomedian Eusebius regained his influence with the emperor, which led to a complete reversal of the position of the contending parties. Eustathius of Antioch, one of the staunchest supporters of Athanasius, was deposed. If Theodoret is to be trusted, one of his accusers, when seized by a serious illness, retracted her accusation in a sensational manner. But Socrates Scholasticus and Sozomen are reticent about the nature of the charges, and only tell us that Eustathius had been unfortunate enough to get involved in a controversy with Eusebius of Caesarea. Marcellus of Ancyra was the next victim, a friend and champion of Athanasius, found it impossible to defend the Nicene decisions without falling into Sabellianism; he was deposed in 336. In the meantime, Eusebius of Nicomedia turned against obdurate Athanasius. Following Arius' restoration to the emperor's favour, the emperor commanded Athanasius to readmit Arius to communion. Athanasius refused - leading to accusations of treason against the emperor.

Athanasius was exiled to Trier, and Alexander of Constantinople was ordered to receive Arius back into communion. Alexander was conflicted. He dared not disobey the command, but he was opposed to Arius' reinstatement. He requested the prayers of his fellow Nicene Christians that either he or Arius might be removed from the world before the latter was admitted to communion. The prayer was, Henry Wace notes, a strange one. Meanwhile, Arius was summoned before the emperor and found to be suitably compliant. And yet, the very day before he was to be readmitted to communion, Arius died suddenly. Socrates describes his death thus:

It was then Saturday, and . . . going out of the imperial palace, attended by a crowd of Eusebian [Eusebius of Nicomedia is meant] partisans like guards, he [Arius] paraded proudly through the midst of the city, attracting the notice of all the people. As he approached the place called Constantine's Forum, where the column of porphyry is erected, a terror arising from the remorse of conscience seized Arius, and with the terror a violent relaxation of the bowels: he therefore enquired whether there was a convenient place near, and being directed to the back of Constantine's Forum, he hastened thither. Soon after a faintness came over him, and together with the evacuations his bowels protruded, followed by a copious haemorrhage, and the descent of the smaller intestines: moreover portions of his spleen and liver were brought off in the effusion of blood, so that he almost immediately died. The scene of this catastrophe still is shown at Constantinople, as I have said, behind the shambles in the colonnade: and by persons going by pointing the finger at the place, there is a perpetual remembrance preserved of this extraordinary kind of death.

Whether Arius' death was miraculous, as many Nicene Christians believed, or he was the victim of poisoning by his enemies, is a matter of supposition, but the extraordinary death of Arius, followed as it was a year later by that of Constantine himself, led to a temporary lull in the controversy.

*This article from Wikipedia (c) uses text from A Dictionary of Christian Biography and Literature to the End of the Sixth Century A.D., with an Account of the Principal Sects and Heresies by Henry Wace.*

## Notes

1. Carroll, A History of Christendom, II, p. 10
2. Carroll, History of Christendom, II, p. 10
3. Carroll, 11
4. Carroll, p. 11
5. Carroll, p. 12
6. Carroll, p. 12