

## Athanasius of Alexandria

This essay examines the Trinitarian theology of Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296-373). His writings span more than forty years and have played a significant role in shaping the Church's understanding of God's triunity.<sup>1</sup> Athanasius's notable works defend the Council of Nicaea in 325 and refute the Arian heresy.<sup>2</sup> This paper examines Athanasius's defence of the Nicene formula that the Son is of the same substance as the Father (ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί) in his rejection of the Arians. The essay will mainly utilise Athanasius's *Orationes Contra Arianos* and *De Decretis Nicaenae Synodi* as primary sources<sup>3</sup>, supported by recent scholarship.

Firstly, it is fundamental to understand the broader context of Athanasius's work in relation to the Arians and the Council of Nicaea. Athanasius rejected the teachings connected to the doctrine advocated by Arius, which bears his name. The controversy arose around 318-322, when Arius disagreed with Bishop Alexander of Alexandria's views on the eternal generation of the Son. Unlike Alexander, Arius believed that the Son is not co-eternal and is therefore subordinate to the Father.<sup>4</sup> He argued that the Son was a creation of the Father, who is the creator of all things, and therefore, there must have been a time before the Son was begotten.<sup>5</sup> Khaled Anatolios observes that, for Arius, the Father is the only eternal hypostasis, while the Son and the Spirit are subordinate, unequal hypostases. Arius did not deny the Son's divinity but envisioned a "framework of a graded hierarchy of transcendence".<sup>6</sup> Arius strongly believed he was correct and, feeling "persecuted" by Alexander,<sup>7</sup> wrote to several

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, "The doctrine of the Holy Trinity according to St Athanasius," *Anglican Theological Review* 71, no. 4 (1989): 395, <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=f8b3a3de-9709-3d37-989a-f944a2804624>.

<sup>2</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2004), 44–45, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/undiv/detail.action?docID=180317>.

<sup>3</sup> All direct quotations and references to these texts in this essay will be from: Philip Schaff, Henry Wace, and Athanasius, *A select library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian church. Second series / Vol. 4, St. Athanasius: Select works and letters*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 16, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0198755066.001.0001>, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0198755066.001.0001>.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Joseph White, *The Trinity: On the Nature and Mystery of the One God* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 125–26.

<sup>6</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: the development and meaning of Trinitarian doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 37.

<sup>7</sup> Arius, *Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia*, 1. Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, ed., *The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings: Volume 1: God*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

bishops, including Eusebius of Nicomedia, whom he thought would be understanding.

Arius's letter to Eusebius made his theology clear:

We are persecuted because we say that the Son has a beginning, but that God is beginningless. We are persecuted for this reason too, because we say that he is from nothing. We speak in this way because he is neither a part of God nor from some substrate.<sup>8</sup>

Athanasius expressed disgust at the ideas promulgated by Arius in his *Thalia*, writing stating that they were “mockeries...repulsive and most irreligious...[that] ‘God was not always a Father;’ ... ‘once He [Son] was not,’”<sup>9</sup> He went so far in *De Decretis* as accusing the Arians of “madness” at suggesting, “‘There once was a time when He was not’”.<sup>10</sup> These claims by the Arians were at the heart of issues that the Council of Nicaea addressed in 325.

The Council of Nicaea introduced the term *homoousios* (ὁμοούσιος) to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son, ruling out the Arian belief that the Son was created. Lewis Ayres notes the lack of surviving records of the proceedings.<sup>11</sup> Athanasius was a deacon and accompanied Bishop Alexander to the Council. He provided details about the Council in his *De Decretis*, written nearly three decades after the event, to further address ongoing Arian matters. Ayres notes Athanasius seems to have referred to Eusebius of Caesarea's *Epistula ad Caesarienses* from 326.<sup>12</sup> Eusebius proposed his own version of a “formula of faith” to the Council.<sup>13</sup> However, Emperor Constantine urged the inclusion of *homoousios*, which was interpreted to mean:

the Son is "of one substance with the Father," not in the manner of bodies nor similarly to mortal creatures, for it is neither by a division of the substance nor by a cutting off, nor by any passion or change or alteration of the Father's substance and power...that the Son of God bears no resemblance to the begotten creatures, but is made like in every way only to the Father who begot him, and is not from any other hypostasis and substance, but from the Father.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Letter to Eusebius*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Athanasius, *Orationes Contra Arianos*, I.5.

<sup>10</sup> Athanasius, *De Decretis Nicaenae Synodi*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, 88.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis Ayres, "Athanasius' Initial Defense of the Term Homousios: Rereading the De Decretis," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12, no. 3 (2004): 337, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/athanasius-initial-defense-term-rereading-de/docview/215202526/se-2?accountid=152376>.

<sup>13</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Epistula ad Caesarienses*, 1. "Eusebius of Caesarea, Letter to the Caesarienses," Catholic Library, accessed 1 April 2026, [https://catholiclibrary.org/library/view?docId=/Fathers-Synchronized-EN/Eusebius\\_Caesariensis\\_Epistula\\_ad\\_Caesarienses.en.html;chunk.id=00000003](https://catholiclibrary.org/library/view?docId=/Fathers-Synchronized-EN/Eusebius_Caesariensis_Epistula_ad_Caesarienses.en.html;chunk.id=00000003).

<sup>14</sup> *Epistula ad Caesarienses*, 12.

The outcome of the Nicene Council was a statement of faith declaring the Son is “from the substance of the Father” (ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς) and “begotten not made, of one substance with the Father” (γεννηθέντα οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ πατρί).<sup>15</sup> This, however, did not settle the matter, and the Arian issue continued.

Athanasius succeeded Alexander as Bishop of Alexandria in 328 and continued to emphasise the unique nature of the Father and Son. It is not until *De Decretis* that Athanasius makes a real defence of *homoousios*. R.P.C. Hanson suggests that, up to that point, it might not have been seen as important.<sup>16</sup> The only reference to *homoousios* before then is in *Contra Arianos*,<sup>17</sup> where Athanasius remarks that the Son is “Very Son of the Father, natural and genuine, proper to His essence...not a creature or work, but an offspring proper to the Father’s essence.”<sup>18</sup> The use of *homoousios* was difficult for some to accept because the word is not Scriptural and open to Sebellian misinterpretation.<sup>19</sup> There was an opinion in the 350s that the correct term was that the Son must be ‘like in essence’ (*homoiousios*) to the Father.<sup>20</sup> Athanasius makes strong use of scripture in *Contra Arianos* to refute the Arians. Thomas Weinandy observes that the entire text is structured around contested scriptural passages.<sup>21</sup> Athanasius maintains that it is clear the Scriptures proclaim the Son’s eternity.<sup>22</sup> The summary of his arguments rebuts the Arian formula and clarifies that the Son “is inseparable from the Father, and never was there when He was not, but He was always; and being the Father’s Image and Radiance, He has the Father’s eternity.”<sup>23</sup>

Ayres notes that Athanasius began defending Nicaea around 353 in his *De Decretis*, by asserting that both the terms *homoousios* and *ousios* are “important scriptural terminologies” emphasising the Son’s status as the Father’s Wisdom and Word.<sup>24</sup> Hanson writes that it was around that time when Athanasius began to refute competing doctrinal formulas that did not

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<sup>15</sup> *Epistula ad Caesarienses*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 437.

<sup>17</sup> Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381*, 436.

<sup>18</sup> *Contra Arianos*, I.9.

<sup>19</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 18. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/undiv/detail.action?docID=180317>.

<sup>20</sup> Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: the development and meaning of Trinitarian doctrine*, 42.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas G. Weinandy, *Athanasius: a theological introduction* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 66, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1942577>, 1 online resource (viii, 150 pages).

<sup>22</sup> *Contra Arianos*, I.13.

<sup>23</sup> *Contra Arianos*, III.28.

<sup>24</sup> Ayres, "Athanasius' Initial Defense of the Term Homousios: Rereading the De Decretis," 337.

promote the unity of the Father and Son.<sup>25</sup> Athanasius writes of Nicaea that the Bishops were moved “to collect the sense of the Scriptures...that the Son is ‘one in essence with the Father...and not merely like, but the same in likeness’”.<sup>26</sup> Athanasius clearly refutes the Arian arguments that the Son is a creature. This was essential to his argument that real salvation is only attainable because of the Son’s unity with God.

Athanasius argued that a created Son could not join with the created and achieve salvation. The Son must have come from the Father, “proper to His essence”, and have taken on human flesh.<sup>27</sup> Only because of this could Athanasius conclude about the Son, “He was not man, and then became God, but He was God, and then became man, and that to deify us”.<sup>28</sup> However, as Weinandy points out, Athanasius did not mean that the Father and the Son are identical (*monoousion*), but that they are identical only in what they are (*homoousion*) and therefore one God.<sup>29</sup> Salvation is important to Athanasius because the benefits that the Son bestows through his sacrifice are attainable only because the Son is of the same essence as the Father. Although Athanasius concentrated on the relationship between the Father and Son, he was the first to affirm the co-equal unity of the Son and Spirit with the Father.<sup>30</sup> This is clearly illustrated in *Contra Arianos*:

For there is but one form of Godhead, which is also in the Word; and one God, the Father, existing by Himself according as He is above all, and appearing in the Son according as He pervades all things, and in the Spirit according as in Him He acts in all things through the Word. For thus we confess God to be one through the Triad”.<sup>31</sup>

Thomas Torrance correctly notes that the above points to the ultimate centre of belief in the Trinity,<sup>32</sup> and refers to Athanasius’s letters to Serapion as further proof. Athanasius dismisses the Arian argument that the Spirit is also a creature.<sup>33</sup> Athanasius explains in the *Letters to Serapion*, I.20, that scriptures, such as John 3:16 and 16:7, affirm that the unity within the

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<sup>25</sup> Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381*, 438.

<sup>26</sup> *De Decretis*, 20.

<sup>27</sup> *Contra Arianos*, II.70.

<sup>28</sup> *Contra Arianos*, I.39.

<sup>29</sup> Weinandy, *Athanasius: a theological introduction*, 77.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Widdicombe, "Athanasius and the Making of the Doctrine of the Trinity," *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 6, no. 4 (1997): 456, <https://doi.org/10.1177/106385129700600410>, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/106385129700600410>.

<sup>31</sup> *Contra Arianos*, III.15.

<sup>32</sup> Torrance, "The doctrine of the Holy Trinity according to St Athanasius," 395.

<sup>33</sup> Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, I.2. Source: Athanasius, *The letters of Saint Athanasius concerning the Holy Spirit*, trans. C. R. B. Shapland (London: Epworth Press, 1951).

Trinity is inseparable. The Son became flesh “in order to offer up this body for all, and that we partaking of His Spirit, might be deified, a gift which we could not otherwise have gained than by His clothing Himself in our created body...But as we, by receiving the Spirit, do not lose our own proper substance, so the Lord, when made man for us, and bearing a body, was no less God”.<sup>34</sup> Torrance concludes that for Athanasius the Trinity is coeternal and coequal in relationship to each other. Father, Son and Spirit are One God as defined in the Nicene Creed.<sup>35</sup>

In conclusion, Athanasius upheld the Nicene formula that the Son is of the same substance as the Father and rejected teachings linked to the Arian doctrine that the Son is a creature. He defended the Nicene declaration that the Father and Son are homoousios in his writings. For Athanasius, it was clear that salvation depended on this relationship. Modern understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity owes much to Athanasius and the way he shaped it for future generations.

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<sup>34</sup> *De Decretis*, 14.

<sup>35</sup> Torrance, "The doctrine of the Holy Trinity according to St Athanasius," 404.

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