



Athanasius

Against the World

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Tyre is a city built on a rocky outcrop jutting into the Mediterranean Sea in what is modern day Lebanon. It was here in A.D. 335 that the Bishop of Alexandria was summoned by the Roman Emperor Constantine to appear before a gathering of fellow bishops and answer charges that had been brought against him. Athanasius was at the centre of a theological storm surrounding the Church's understanding of Jesus. For well over a decade debate had raged as to whether Jesus was in some way or other created by God, or was in fact eternally of the same essence as God.

But Athanasius was being called before the gathering of bishops, not to debate the divinity of Jesus, but to answer the charge that he had murdered a man—Arsenius—cut off his arm and used that arm in the practice of sorcery! It was an accusation that had surfaced earlier but had been answered to the Emperor's satisfaction. Now it had

resurfaced and Athanasius interpreted the accusation as being yet another salvo fired off by those who opposed him in the theological debate over Jesus.

Athanasius' accusers produced, to the watching church leaders at the Council of Tyre, a hand which they claimed was that removed by Athanasius from the man he had murdered. In what must have been a wonderful piece of theatre, Athanasius then produced a live Arsenius to the Synod of bishops! The accusation of murder having been readily dismissed, there was still the matter of the missing hand. Athanasius had Arsenius dramatically led into the chamber with both his hands concealed by a cloak. In front of the watching bishops Athanasius first revealed one hand to the gathering, paused for effect, then exhibited Arsenius' second hand which was also still attached to his body. Athanasius then addressed the gathering:

Arsenius, as you see, is found to have two hands: let my accusers show the place whence the third was cut off.¹

The event was typical of the world of swirling accusation and counter accusation, intrigue and plotting that characterised the Church's debate over this important

1 Socrates, *The Ecclesiastical History* 1.29 (NPNF² Vol. 2, p. 31). See also Sozomen, *The Ecclesiastical History* 2.25 (NPNF² Vol. 2, p. 275) and Athanasius, *Defence Against the Arians* 6.72 (NPNF² Vol. 4, p. 137–38). NPNF² is the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. 14 vols. Repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978.

theological issue. And Athanasius was always at its centre!

Formative Years

Athanasius was born into a vital hub of Christianity—Alexandria, Egypt—sometime in the closing days of the third century. Uncertainty over the year of his birth actually proved to be important—one of the many accusations leveled against him was that he was under the legal age for a bishop when he was installed as Bishop of Alexandria in 328.² Whilst not a great deal is known about his early years, it is clear that Athanasius at a fairly young age was taken under the wing, educated and prepared for a life of service in the Church, by the Bishop of Alexandria at the time—a man confusingly named Alexander.

By the time Athanasius had reached his late teens, he had already lived through such a terrible period of persecution of Christians that it came to be known as the *Great Persecution*,³ and the equally turbulent events surrounding the conversion to Christianity of Constantine,⁴ who would eventually by force of arms establish himself as sole Emperor of the Roman Empire.

2 Athanasius, *Festal Letters and Their Index: Index 3*. (NPNF² Vol. 4, p.503). See also Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius*, (The Early Church Fathers; London: Routledge, 2004), p. 5.

3 Roman Emperor Diocletian began the persecution in 303.

4 For details of Constantine's conversion, see Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, III (NPNF² Vol. 2, p. 283ff).

The advent of a Christian emperor coincided with a period of great theological controversy, as the Church wrestled with its understanding of the nature of the Lord Jesus Christ.

On the Incarnation

The controversy began in Alexandria when a presbyter (that is, a pastor or elder) called Arius challenged Bishop Alexander's understanding of the relationship between Jesus and God. Whilst there are various versions of events, what is clear is that Arius accused Alexander of holding to a heresy that blended the Father, Son and Spirit so closely as to lose their distinctiveness.⁵ Very little of what Arius actually wrote has survived to us today. His main theological work was called the *Thalia*. Interestingly, it was written in verse, and a form of verse that at the time was more commonly associated with popular and often bawdy songs.⁶ An unorthodox, but effective, way to spread his views! The little that survives of the *Thalia* comes to us courtesy of Athanasius. So there is naturally a degree of scepticism about how accurately Athanasius represented Arius' opinions. However, even the most sceptical are inclined to accept as authentic a passage from the *Thalia* which Athanasius reproduces:

5 The heresy was called Sabellianism.

6 R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), p. 10.

The Unbegun made the Son ... For He is not equal, no, nor one in essence with Him ... Foreign from the Son in essence is the Father, for He is without beginning ... though the Son was not, the Father was God.⁷

This passage is consistent with the way Athanasius presents Arius' position elsewhere in his writings. Arius set forth a view of Jesus as God's Son that separated Him from God the Father. Arius argued that since Jesus was the Son of God, there must have been a point when He became the Son. Therefore Jesus was not eternal; at some point He had not existed:

God was not always a Father: The Son was not always And since all things are creatures, He also is a creature and a thing made ... there was a time when the Word of God Himself was not.⁸

Arius goes on to insist that Jesus did not share God's *essence*. That which makes God to be God was not present in Jesus. This issue of essence—expressed in the Greek word *ousia*—lay at the heart of the debate. It was clearly an issue of tremendous importance for the Church. How could Jesus be worshiped as God if He did not share in the very essence of God but was in fact

7 Athanasius, *Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia* 2.15 (NPNF² Vol. 4, p. 457). For a helpful discussion of this issue see Hanson, *Search*, pp. 5-15.

8 Athanasius, *To the Bishops of Egypt* 2.12 (NPNF² Vol. 4, p. 229). See also Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.5 (NPNF² Vol. 2, p. 3).

a part of the creation? How could Jesus save unless He was not only human but also divine?⁹ Can we know God through Jesus if Jesus is not Himself God? Athanasius rightly observed that Arius was teaching that:

... the Son can neither see nor know the Father perfectly and exactly. For having a beginning of existence, He [Jesus] cannot know Him [God the Father] that is without beginning...¹⁰

So far as Athanasius was concerned, the teaching of Arius threatened everything the Bible had to say about salvation.¹¹ So he wrote:

...to change the corruptible to incorruption was proper to none other than the Saviour Himself, who in the beginning made all things out of nothing; that only the Image of the Father could re-create the likeness of the Image in men, that none save our Lord Jesus Christ could give to mortals immortality, and that only the Word Who ... is alone the Father's true and sole-begotten Son could teach men about Him...¹²

9 David M. Gwyn, *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father* (Christian Theology in Context. Oxford: OUP, 2012), p. 70.

10 Athanasius, *To the Bishops of Egypt* 2.12 (NPNF² Vol. 4, p. 229).

11 Gwyn, *Athanasius*, p. 80.

12 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 4.19 (London: A.R. Mowbray & Co, 1953).

Athanasius goes on to argue that ‘having proved his Godhead by his works’, Jesus was then in a position where He could ‘offer the sacrifice on behalf of all.’¹³

Arius’ views began to win significant support all around the Mediterranean, prompting Alexander to call a meeting of church leaders from across North Africa, who agreed to condemn Arius’ teaching as heretical and excommunicate him.¹⁴ But Arius had managed to win over some influential supporters, none more so than Eusebius, the Bishop of Nicomedia (modern day Izmit, Turkey) who strenuously advocated for Arius’ restoration.¹⁵ By the time Emperor Constantine had established himself as sole ruler of the Roman Empire, it was an Empire shattered by theological disharmony! Recognising that a united Christianity was necessary to help hold together his vast, sprawling and diverse Empire, Constantine called together the leaders of the Church to a Council in Nicaea (modern day Iznik, Turkey).¹⁶

They met in May 325 with the Emperor himself attending at key points. It is difficult to know exactly how many people attended—probably over 300 bishops

13 Ibid.

14 Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.6 (NPNF² Vol. 2, pp. 3–6).

15 Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 6 (NPNF² Vol. 4, pp. 137–47).
Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.6 (NPNF² Vol. 2, pp. 3–6).

16 An Ecumenical Council referred to the fact that the whole Church was meant to be involved—up to this point various councils had been regional in character. The Council of Nicaea is recognised as the first of seven such councils in the history of the early Church.