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The Origins of Christianity and the Bible

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46. How the 4th Century Church Fathers Declared Jesus Equal to God

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Up to the fourth century, the majority of the Church fathers explained that the Father is greater than the Son. But in the fourth century some of them began to claim that Jesus was equal to the Father. This led to theological disputes.

In 318 CE Arius (a Christian presbyter of the Baucalis district of Alexandria) was preaching at one of the churches of Alexandria the standard beliefs of the early Church fathers: that the Father is greater than Jesus. A man named Melitius noticed that Arius' teaching was different from the teaching of Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria. Wanting to cause trouble to Arius, he went and told Bishop Alexander about this. Bishop Alexander was one of those who had elevated Jesus to equality with the Father. When Alexander found out, he tried to force Arius to change his beliefs. Arius refused. Arius believed, "God, the cause of all things, is alone without beginning, while the Son, begotten by the Father outside time and created and established before all ages, was not {did not exist} before he was begotten ... was given existence by the only Father."

Epiphanius wrote, "His {Arius'} starting point was his attempt to interpret the words of Solomon in Proverbs: 'The Lord created me {i.e. Jesus, the Wisdom of God} the beginning of his ways ...'" Epiphanius also wrote that the Arius and his followers pointed to Hebrews 3:1-2 to show that God created Jesus: "... the apostle and High Priest of our profession, Jesus, who was faithful to him who created him {Gr. piston onto tw poihsanti auton, or, who was faithful to his creator}, like Moses {also was faithful} in his {God's} house." (Hebrews 3:1-2) Arius emphasized Jesus' limited knowledge: "But of that day and that hour knows no man, no, not the angels ... neither the Son, but the Father." (Mark 13:32 KJV) Epiphanius mentions several more verses (which have been explained earlier in this book), which Arius and his followers used to show that the Father is greater than Jesus and that Jesus is subject to the Father.

Bishop Alexander convened the bishops who shared his beliefs to a synod in Alexandria. Epiphanius wrote, "... Alexander ... made haste to convene bishops, [call] a council, institute an inquiry and interrogation, and demand of Arius [an account] of the pernicious heterodoxy with which he was infected." In September 323 CE this synod condemned Arius and excommunicated him. But Arius did not start a heresy and he was not alone. A large number of Alexandrian Christians shared his beliefs. Epiphanius wrote, "... he managed to draw apart from the church into a single group seven hundred virgins {celibate believers} ... seven presbyters and twelve deacons." Also, many bishops around the Roman Empire shared his beliefs. They came to his rescue. A month later, (in October 323 CE), Eusebius of Nicomedia and other bishops sponsored a synod at Bithynia, which annulled Arius' excommunication. This was the beginning of a controversy that lasted several decades. During that period there was an inordinate number of fiercely feuding synods, some pro-Arian and others anti-Arian.

At about that time, the famous Athanasius emerged as a leader. He received his philosophical and theological training in Alexandria from Bishop Alexander. Athanasius was a charismatic man and a skillful manipulator. He managed to draw the emperor of the Byzantine Empire (the Eastern Roman Empire) Constantine the Great to his side.

Eusebius of Caesarea wrote that at that time, Constantine had a personal relationship with God. But, the truth is, Constantine was not a Christian when this feud began. He did not become a Christian until years later, at the end of his life, when he was baptized. (In Orthodoxy baptism makes one a Christian.) Constantine was not a Christian. Nevertheless, he dominated the councils and rearranged the beliefs of Christianity. Like other Byzantine emperors who followed him, he claimed that he had been appointed to his position by God. He made it his personal duty to remove heresy and to propagate what he considered the true religion. So, he used persecution to eliminate the dispute to secure his imperial position and to unite religiously his empire. He took the side of Athanasius and sent a letter to Arius in which he stated that this dispute was fostered by Arius' excessive leisure and academic contention, and that it was trivial, and that it would be resolved without difficulty. (Constantine called this issue "trivial," which shows that he misunderstood its importance and its complexity.)

In 325 CE Constantine summoned about 318 delegate bishops to a synod in Nicaea. He delivered the opening address of the synod. He demanded that the bishops come into an agreement with one creed, and since he had chosen the side of Athanasius, he meant the creed of Athanasius. He threatened, that any bishop who would refuse to sign this creed would be excommunicated from the Church. He urged Athanasius to convince the synod that the decision would determine the issue of whether Jesus is truly a savior. (In other words, if they rejected Jesus as equal to the Father, Jesus could not save them from Hell.) Constantine authorized Athanasius to lead the synod, even though Athanasius was a mere deacon of Bishop Alexander. There was a large opposition. But because of the pressure from Constantine and the urging of Athanasius, the synod formulated the original draft of the Athanasian creed. Jesus was declared co-equal, co-eternal, and co-substantive with the Father. Constantine personally added the word "homo-ousios" (co-substantive). Several Church leaders who believed that God is greater than Jesus for fear of losing their positions signed it. One of them was Eusebius of Caesarea. Before the Synod of Nicaea Eusebius had maintained that God was greater than Jesus. He had written, "... the second place, next to the Father, being held by the power of the Divine Word {Jesus} ... And the next after this second Being there is ... a third Being, the Holy Spirit." He, along with many Church fathers of the Eastern churches, believed that the Father existed before the son: "... Eusebius in Caesarea ... and all those {Christian Church fathers} in the East say that God exists before the Son underivatively, they have been condemned ..." They were condemned because of their beliefs. Eusebius and two of his allies were condemned and excommunicated provisionally. This took place in Antioch sometime in January 325 (a few months before the Synod of Nicaea). But when the Synod of Nicaea met later in that year, Eusebius, in fear of losing his position, renounced his beliefs and thus he was exonerated with the explicit approval of Constantine.

At the Synod of Nicaea Eusebius of Nicomedia (another Church father who believed that God is greater than Jesus) led the opposition against the Homo'ousians (the party of Athanasius). When the Synod finally accepted the Athanasian creed, Eusebius of Nicomedia and his followers, fearing for their positions, signed it. Photius wrote, "So Eusebius of Nicomedia ... and his companions, having concealed their heresy because of the desire for their own sees and their love of the bishopric, and having at first signed their names to the Council ... offered again tomes of repentance in order to be granted pardon for having peddled away their orthodoxy ... There after, as they were eager to stir up again the heresy of Arius ..." However, Eusebius of Nicomedia refused to sign the anathema that condemned the Arians. Shortly after the Synod he took courage and recanted. He re-declared his earlier belief that God is greater than Jesus. He renewed his alliance with Arius. Consequently, Constantine exiled him to Gaul.

A shake-down followed the synod. Several bishops were removed. Constantine publicly condemned Arius and the Arians. Epiphanius wrote, "The blessed emperor, convoking Arius and certain bishops, carried out an interrogation. Arius ... was charged in the emperor's presence ... he was convicted in the emperor's presence. ... The emperor, however, inflamed with zeal, wrote a great encyclical letter to the whole Roman empire against

Arius and his faith ... and begins {the letter} as follows: ‘Constantinus ... to Arius ... A bad exegete {interpreter} is indeed an image and statue of the devil.’” Constantine demonized Arius and sent him to exile. At that time, Constantine was not a Christian, yet he was a major factor in formulating the beliefs of Christianity.

Eusebius of Nicomedia remained in exile in Gaul until 328, when (according to Epiphanius) he pretended to have repented, made a confession of faith, and Constantine allowed him to return. After he returned from the exile, Eusebius began to cultivate a friendship with Constantine’s sister, Constantia. Through this friendship he began to influence Constantine. By continually pointing out the faults of the Homo’ousian leaders (the anti-Arians) he caused Constantine to change his beliefs and become pro-Arian. Consequently, Constantine deposed Athanasius at a synod in Tyre in 335 and brought back Arius from exile and reinstated him in a synod at Jerusalem in 335. Epiphanius avoided mentioning in his writings that towards the end of his life Constantine became pro-Arian. Inadvertently, Photius implied that Constantine favored the Arians: “When Constantine the Great was nearing the end of his life, he had the testament of his last wishes sealed up, and handed to Eutocius, a man who bore in his breast the poison of the Arian heresy.”

Eusebius of Nicomedia and Eusebius of Caesarea (the latter by that time had re-declared his earlier, Arian, beliefs: God is greater than Jesus) took part in the expulsion of Athanasius. Thus, the tide turned the other way: the Arians ruled. After Arius’ death (ca. 336 CE) a new wave of Arian theologians emerged, the Neo-Arians. In 336 at Constantinople Athanasius was accused of threatening to interfere with the grain supply from Egypt, and without a formal trial Constantine exiled him to Rhineland. Epiphanius wrote, “Angry as the emperor was, Pope {Bishop} Athanasius spoke painful words to him {Constantine}: The Lord will judge between me and you, since you agree with those {the Arians} who slander your humble servant.” At that time, Constantine was pro-Arian. The position of Athanasius in Alexandria was filled by the Arian bishop Gregory.

For the most part during the 40 years following the death of Constantine (337 CE), Arianism was the official orthodoxy of the Byzantine Empire (the Eastern Roman Empire). According to the Anglo-Saxon theologian, historian, and chronologist, Bede (672/673 to 735 CE), Arianism was widespread “throughout the whole world” and as far as Britain. Even though Bede condemned Arianism, he inadvertently revealed that Arianism was the belief of most Christians of that time. Epiphanius confirmed that Arius’ beliefs were widespread: “In ... Scythopolis {a city of north Palestine} ... everyone was Arian.” He also wrote, “... a great fire as well was ignited from him {Arius} which consumed almost the entire Roman Empire, especially the eastern part ...” The beliefs of Arius, which caused this “great fire,” were the standard beliefs of the early Gentile Christians.

During that period (as well as in later periods) the emperors took part in ecclesiastical disputes. They tampered with the Christian beliefs, and in effect shaped the future of the Christian faith. After Constantine the Great came Constantius II. He was pro-Arian. During his reign the Homo’ousians pretended believing in something other than what they believed for fear of losing their positions. Epiphanius wrote, “... they kept it secret all that time ... they ... were pretending {to believe} otherwise, because the emperor’s power which they feared.” Constantius favored Eusebius of Nicomedia. He appointed him as Bishop of Constantinople in 339. In 341 he ordered a synod in Antioch/Seleucia over which Eusebius of Nicomedia presided. This synod approved a creed, which eliminated the “co-substantive” (“homo’ousios”) clause, which had been decreed by the Synod of Nicaea. They declared, “... we reject {the word} ‘co-substantive’ as foreign to the scriptures ...” The synod declared Arius’ beliefs orthodox: “... they {the bishops of the synod} had weighted his {Arius’} faith in a true scale, and saw it to be in accordance with the tenets of the Church ...” In this synod the Arian view was exonerated. Like his father, Constantius II ordered the bishops to come to an agreement to define the faith. Their declaration reads, “... to protect the peace of the church and to treat the faith with firm judgment, as our most God-beloved Constantius ordered ...” Nevertheless, they disagreed. The majority of the bishops were Arians. The declaration of the synod alluded that the Homo’ousians were using illicit means to win: “since some people {the Homo’ousians} in the council insulted some of us, silenced others of us, not allowing them to speak, and excluded still others against their will and brought in with them those who had been deposed {thus, not eligible to cast a ballot} ... and ... those who had been ordained irregularly {likewise, not eligible to cast a ballot} ...”

Epiphanius wrote, “Pope Athanasius had acquired a great deal of influence, respect and acceptance [in] Rome ...” The charismatic Athanasius won the respect and acceptance of Constans, the emperor of the Western Roman Empire. As mentioned earlier, Constantius II was pro-Arian, but he tolerated Athanasius as a favor to his brother Constans. In 346 Constans and Constantius II allowed Athanasius to return to Alexandria from his exile as Bishop of Alexandria. Athanasius replaced the Arian bishop Gregory. Athanasius enjoyed a few years of prosperity and an increase in his popularity. But after the death of Constans in 350, Constantius II, being the sole emperor of the Eastern and the Western empires, enforced his pro-Arian policy. Political charges were brought against Athanasius, his banishment was repeated, and in 356 an attempt was made to arrest him during an evening service. Athanasius escaped to Upper Egypt (Southern Egypt), where he found protection in monasteries or houses of friends. Constantius appointed in Athanasius’ position the Arian Bishop George. Annoyed by the Emperor’s persistence Athanasius blasted Constantius in his writings (*History of the Arians*) as a precursor of the Antichrist.

The death of Constantius II caused the tide to turn the other way. Julian the Apostate succeeded him (361-363 CE). He had been baptized and raised as a Christian, but, he pretended being a Christian until he came to power. He loathed Christianity because it was the religion of those who had murdered his father, his brother, and several of his relatives and friends. As a result, after he came to power he publicly announced his conversion to paganism. He became a persistent enemy of Christianity, thus he acquired the epithet “the Apostate.” He allowed Homo’ousian bishops (who had been exiled by Constantius II) to return to their dioceses. His goal was to bring dissension among the Christians: the Arians, who were in control. Soon he began persecuting Christians.

In 361 CE, the Alexandrians murdered the Arian Bishop George of Alexandria. They burned him and scattered his ashes to the wind. Athanasius returned triumphantly once more to his diocese to promote Jesus as equal to God. In 362 Athanasius convened a council at Alexandria during which he appealed for unity and promoted his beliefs. But his revival was quashed when Emperor Julian the Apostate petulantly ordered him to leave Alexandria. Again, Athanasius packed up, he sailed up the Nile, and went in exile in Upper Egypt.

Jovian succeeded Julian the Apostate. He reigned from 363 to 364 CE. He was pro-Athanasian. Jovian reinstated Athanasius to his diocese. So Athanasius was back at it again. In 365 Valens became the emperor. He was pro-Arian. He turned the tide the other way. He ordered into exile the Homo’ousian bishops whom Jovian had restored. One of those bishops was Athanasius. But by this time Athanasius was popular and dared not to run away. Instead of going into exile he moved to the outskirts of Alexandria for a few months and waited for Valens to cool off. The local authorities persuaded Valens to reconsider. Valens gave in. (Near the end of his reign Valens relented and allowed exiled bishops to return.) Athanasius returned to Alexandria for the last time. A few years later, in 373 CE, he died.

But after his death an Arian bishop, Lucius, took over his position. Epiphanius wrote, “Finally when Pope {Bishop} Athanasius died Lucius was sent {as a bishop to Alexandria} and became the source of many evils for the church.” At the time that Epiphanius wrote *Panarion*, (374-376 CE, shortly after Athanasius’ death) the Arians had the upper hand. Epiphanius loathed the Arians. He wrote, “This is still going on, with people being exiled, bishops, presbyters, and deacons, while others are subjected to capital punishment in Alexandria, still others are given to beasts, virgins are being killed, and many others are perishing.” (Epiphanius’ statement must be taken with caution. The atrocities were mutual.) After Epiphanius wrote the *Panarion* the Homo’ousians managed to take control.

However, in their rush to make Jesus equal to the Father, the Homo’ousians forgot the Holy Spirit. They left it trailing behind. In fact, except for the Monarchians, the heretics of the 2nd century who believed that the Holy Spirit and the Father is the same person, the rest of the Gentile Christians since the beginning of Gentile Christianity placed the Holy Spirit third. Epiphanius wrote, “They {the Arians} say that the Spirit is inferior ...” Eusebius of Caesarea wrote, “...the next after this second Being there is ... a third Being, the Holy Spirit.” Tertullian wrote, “Now the Spirit indeed is third from God and the Son.” Justin Martyr wrote, “... and the Prophetic {Holy} Spirit in the third.”

The Homo’ousians decided to promote the Holy Spirit to parity with the two other members of the Trinity to balance it. They convened in the Synod of Constantinople (381 CE) where they amended the Creed of Nicaea with the terms “co-equal, co-eternal, and co-substantive” to apply also to

the Holy Spirit. They also attached a rider to the Creed with an anathema on anyone who claimed that “There was a time when Jesus was not” or “The Son of God is of a different subsistence or substance, or is created.” The anathema was in response to the decision of the Synod of Antioch/Seleucia, which had eliminated the “co-substantive” (“Homo’ousios”) clause. In 397 CE the Roman Catholic Church rubber stamped the decision of the Synod of Constantinople. It was at this point when the Trinity doctrine became truly established.

Finally, the unorthodox belief (the Athanasian creed) became orthodox and the orthodox belief (Arianism) became unorthodox. Athanasius and his fellow bishops with their unrelenting endeavor and their skillful manipulation of the emperors won. Credit is due to the emperors who fought to establish the Athanasian creed. (Constantine is now a saint of the Eastern Orthodox Church.) Finally, credit is due to certain biblical manuscript copyists who sneaked a verse in the Epistle of 1 John, which declares the Trinity: God is three persons. In the following quotation the interpolation appears in capital letters: “For there are three that bear record IN HEAVEN THE FATHER, THE WORD, AND THE HOLY GHOST: AND THESE THREE ARE ONE. AND THERE ARE THREE THAT BEAR WITNESS ON EARTH, the spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.” (1 John 5:7-8 KJV) This interpolation was inserted in Latin manuscripts during the controversy. Its purpose was to silence the Arians. It is commonly known as the “Johannine Comma.” It appears in the KJV and in the Amplified Bible. The KJV translators picked it up from the Latin Vulgate manuscripts. Many years later certain more reliable manuscripts were discovered (such as the codex Sinaiticus), which exposed the manipulation of the Latin Vulgate scribes. Several modern translators were open-minded enough to omit this insertion from their translations. For example, the NIV, the RSV, the NRSV, and the NASB omitted it.

Despite its successful adoption the Athanasian doctrine continued to be perplexing. God is of one nature, while man is of another nature. How could Jesus be a man if he was God? Or, how could Jesus be God if his nature was human? Did Jesus have two natures? Bishops tried to use reason to figure this out. Bishop Nestorius (428-431 CE, bishop in Constantinople) explained that Jesus had only one nature, a special blend of God and man. He asserted that God contributed the divine part of Jesus’ nature, while Mary contributed the human part. He also claimed that since Mary contributed the human part of the nature of Jesus she could not be called “the mother of God” (as she was called by the Orthodox Christians). This explanation did not go over well because the Orthodox Christians worshipped Mary practically as a god. In 431 the Council of Ephesus declared the Nestorian explanation a heresy. They deposed Nestorius and exiled him out of the Byzantine empire, and persecuted his followers. To this day, the nature of Jesus continues to be a perplexity. In 1648 the English government, put a ban on explaining the nature of Jesus. Under the guidance of the Catholic Church, it passed a law making denial of the divinity of Christ a crime punishable by death.

A new issue came up in 589 CE: the power of Jesus within the Trinity. The Catholic church explained that Jesus had as much power as the Father to dispense the Holy Spirit. This explanation stirred another round of disputes. The Orthodox church protested it strongly. They claimed that only the Father has the power to dispense the Holy Spirit. From that point on, the Catholic-Orthodox relations gradually deteriorated to the point where by 1054 CE the Pope excommunicated the Patriarch of Constantinople and, in retaliation, the Patriarch hurled anathemas on the Pope.

In 1531 Michael Servetus (a Spaniard) wrote a treatise, *Concerning the Errors of the Trinity*. He tried to explain the irrationality of the Trinity doctrine. He was condemned by Calvin and his followers and was burned to death. The deification of Jesus and his equality to God has been defended by the kings of Europe. King James I became the “Defender of the Faith” and therefore, an enforcer of the belief that Jesus is God. Most European governments in a direct or an indirect way enforced the belief that Jesus is God.

The perplexity of the Trinity remains unresolved. People learn in school that $1+1+1=3$. But in church they are told $1+1+1=1$. How can three distinct persons be one being? Conservative Christians admit that the Trinity does not make sense. M. R. DeHaan, a renowned Christian apologist, wrote, “The Trinity, that is, three persons in one, is a mystery which is revealed in the Bible, but cannot be understood by the human mind. Since man is finite, and God infinite, this is one of those things which must be accepted by faith, even though it cannot be reasoned out. The Trinity cannot be explained, but it must be believed ...” Believers are told to submit themselves to the interpretations of their spiritual leaders and accept them without understanding them.

The major beliefs of Christianity were formed by those who had the power to make their own views the standard view for the mass of believers. **Note: The book contains over 2,500 footnotes (quotations and references), which explain or document the facts presented. Those footnotes are not included in most excerpts presented in this web site.**

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